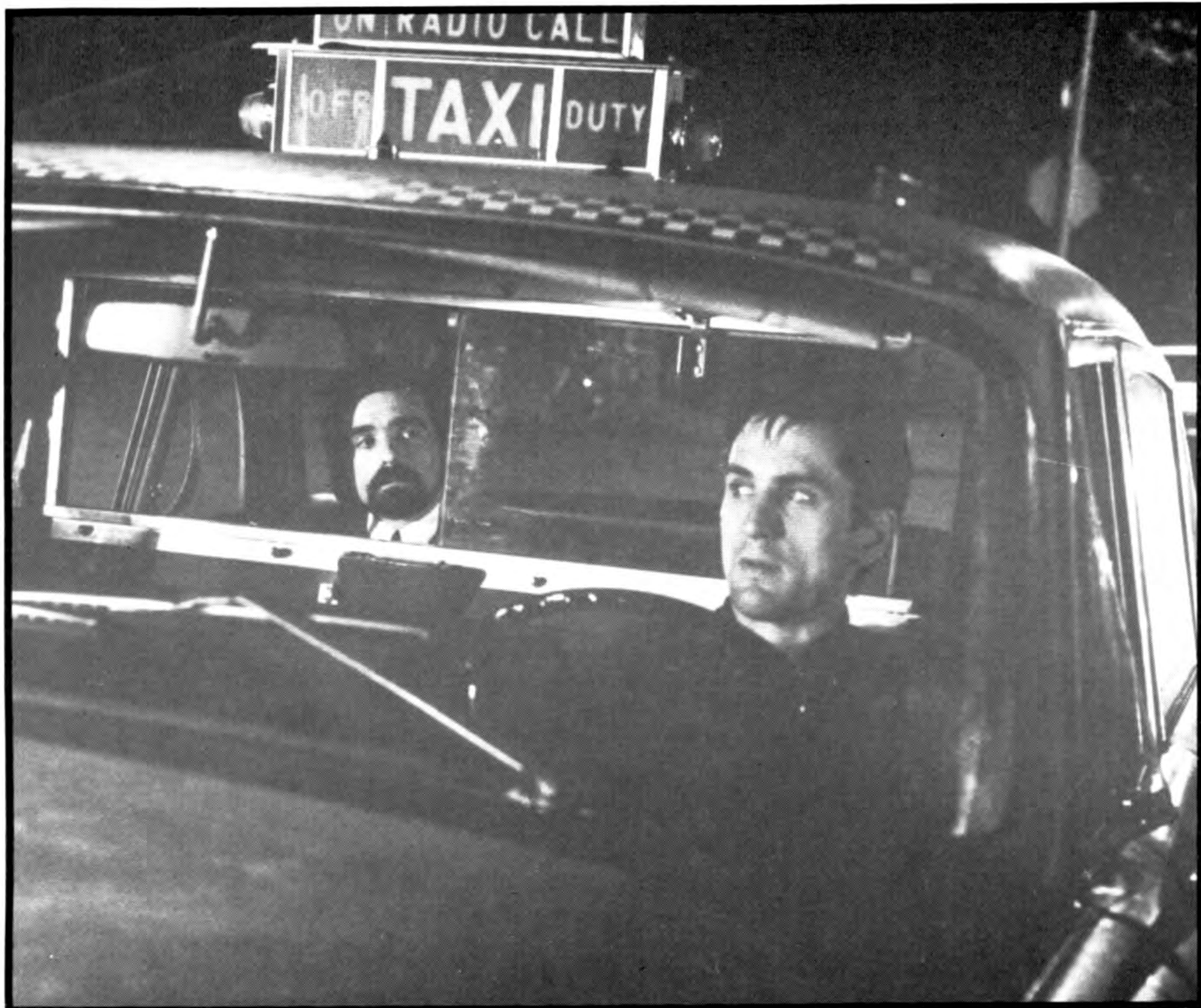


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No. 6



S C O R S E S E

**INTERVIEW WITH
MARTIN SCORSESE**

**ALSO: ISSUES
OF MASCULINITY**

CineAction!

No. 6, August 1986

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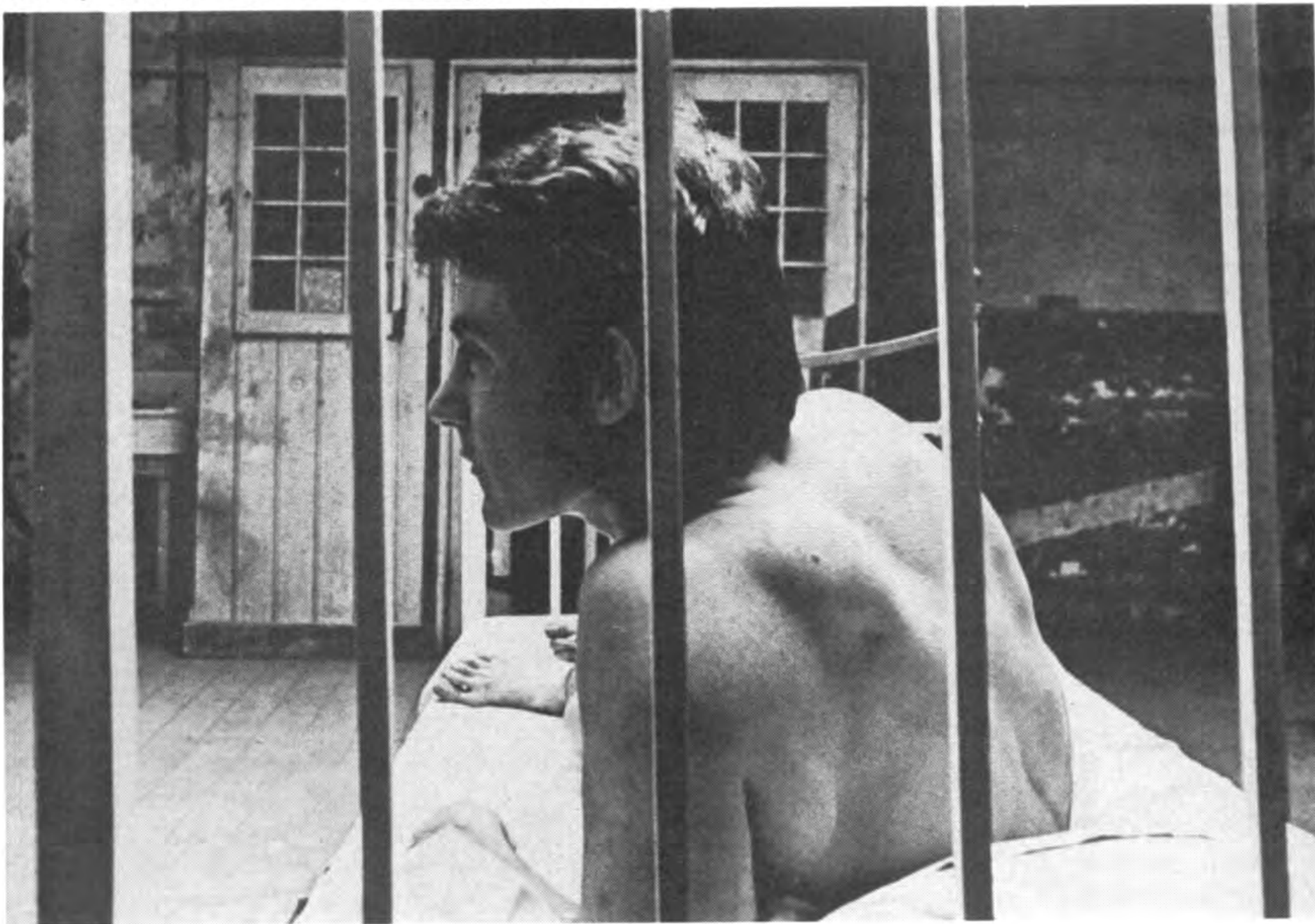
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Front cover: *Taxi Driver*

Harvey Keitel in *Who's That Knocking At My Door*.



From the editors . . .

THIS ISSUE of *CineAction!* takes as its central focus a particular director, Martin Scorsese, whom we strongly feel is one of the most original and creative filmmakers working in the commercial cinema today. While his individual films have received wide critical acclaim, there have been few attempts in recent film literature to address his feature filmwork as a whole. *CineAction!* #6 is an attempt to redress this lack. The interview with Scorsese, especially, seeks to consider the intensely personal quality of his pictures and his own inscription within them, both figuratively and literally. Uninterested in producing a 'mega-hit' (to use his own term)—a trend which at present seems to consume the Hollywood movie industry—Scorsese has continued to make visually overwhelming and beautifully crafted films which nevertheless take risks in terms of their content as well as style. Seen as an entire body of work rather

than as discrete objects, the films offer up to the viewer themes which are deeply rooted in the director's own personal experiences—survival, alienation, spiritual redemption, ambition, success, violence (both internal and external), male/female relationships—personal themes, yet at the same time, universal ones. While the films cover a wide range of genres, it is not a question of repeating a formula, reproducing the conventional and comforting codes, but rather of collapsing them, thereby challenging the very notion of what it is that constitutes a specific generic mode.

In addition the films are marked by certain cohesive elements, not the least of which is that from *Who's That Knocking At My Door* (1969) to *After Hours* (1985), with the exception of *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974) and *Boxcar Bertha* (1972), all are set in New York City, Scorsese's home. In fact, when we look at the films together, the city—its

streets, bars, restaurants, and nightclubs—becomes a subject of the films. The characters who walk these streets are as diverse as the streets and neighborhoods themselves: small-time hoods and mafiosi in Little Italy (*Mean Streets* and *Raging Bull*), out of towners drawn to the city and embroiled in the seamy underworld of its streetlife (*Taxi Driver*), aspiring artists, athletes, and entertainers (*New York, New York*, *Raging Bull*, *King of Comedy*, and *After Hours*), and finally, the uptown corporate office worker and the night people of downtown Soho (*After Hours*). Together the films present a rich and variegated portrait of the city and the lives of its inhabitants. However, 'the city' takes on a broader significance for it is in these streets, these public places, that Scorsese reveals the barely contained violence of contemporary American life in all of its complexity and contradiction. These features of American life are embodied by the films' volatile male protagonists who are consistently depicted as outsiders, those who do not fit comfortably into the expectations of mainstream America. (The ironic exception is Paul/Griffen Dunne [*After Hours*] who clearly does 'fit.' However, upon leaving the safety of his environment he becomes an outsider who is relentlessly pursued, bound and finally, unceremoniously dumped at his 'home,' the corporate office tower.) What is particularly significant about these characters is that their fictional lives share considerable points of intersection with Scorsese's own life. Herein lies Scorsese's strength, and his importance in contemporary American cinema: that in his exploration of the unique—the specific place, the specific individual, he enunciates the tensions and contradictions that characterize the culture as a whole.

The articles that comprise the first section of this issue consist of readings that examine Scorsese's individual films, as well as those which place the films in broader contexts. A discussion of *Taxi Driver* traces the film's ambiguity to two conflicting views of alienation that are expressed by the film; while the codes outlined in Roland Barthes' *S/Z* are used to reveal some of the very specific motifs and symbols that appear in *After Hours*.

New York, New York is re-examined as a melodrama. The film is compared to Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* with particular emphasis on the convergence of the films as 'hysterical texts' which use hysterical males as their protagonists.

Further consideration is given to *After Hours* and the relationship between the new film which stars Griffen Dunne, and the earlier films which featured Robert De Niro. While *After Hours* is seen to be

quite different in this context, certain stylistic and thematic motifs are noted, clearly designating it a 'Scorsesian' work.

The intense analysis of masculinity that has been central to Scorsese's work, most pointedly in *Raging Bull*, has led us to include the complementary theme of issues of masculinity as they are represented in current Hollywood film. Recent theory has done much to shed light upon the ways in which gender is constructed within culture, and its instrumentality in maintaining dominant values and hierarchies. The articles that comprise this section address both these issues. The first details the codes of masculinity as they occur in the increasingly right-wing films of an increasingly right-wing society. William Friedkin's *To Live and Die in LA*, while using the codes, is seen to do so in a way that reveals inherent tensions. The analysis of George Romero's *Day of the Dead* which follows, reveals the film's criticism of masculinity; both its predominance and its ideological manifestations in the institutions of science and the military.

We conclude this issue with articles that are concerned with the recognition of particular films. The first entails the peculiarly Canadian question of what kinds of films should be produced by Canadians, a question that has been debated over the past year in the pages of *The Canadian Forum* and *Cinema Canada*. The article "Radical Marginalia," while reintroducing the debate, refocuses it upon the problem of distribution/visibility that faces this country's marginal narrative films and in particular, its effect on film scholarship.

Finally, in a review of Steven Bach's book, *Final Cut*, about the making of *Heaven's Gate*, and a discussion of the unresolved ambiguities in *Year of the Dragon*, Robin Wood continues his endeavor to bring serious attention to Michael Cimino's films.

**Anthony Irwin
Susan Morrison**

Martin Scorsese setting up a shot for *The King of Comedy*.



An interview with **Martin Scorsese**

At present, Martin Scorsese is hard at work finishing *The Color Of Money*. He generously agreed to a telephone interview for this issue of *CineAction!*, which subsequently took place on July 8, 1986.

by **Susan Morrison**

Of the seven feature length films which have male protagonists, the first two used Harvey Keitel as lead; the next four used Robert De Niro. Was there any significance in the switch to De Niro?

That's a delicate question. I think the next time I used De Niro was *Taxi Driver*, and the situation was where you have a man who just won the Academy Award, a low-budget picture that nobody wanted to make, a director who had just done *Mean Streets* and *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, and

a script by Paul Schrader who had just sold a script called *The Yakuza*. He had become the hottest scriptwriter in Hollywood in those six months. So you see, with all those elements together we said, sure, let's give it a shot. Also, De Niro and myself and Schrader felt very, very much attuned to that story and that screenplay. In fact, Bob was working on something of his own, about assassins, as a writer I think. *Taxi Driver* was something so personal that I felt as if I had written it myself. So we all just fell into it together, and, after working on *Taxi Driver*, we started working together closer,

De Niro and myself. By that time Harvey got involved with European films, and started to become a bigger star there. A strange thing happened, too, in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. Keitel was seen by some people in Hollywood at that time—that was over 10 years ago—as being threatening to women, and therefore women wouldn't want to see him in a theatre. And so, all these elements together and Harvey going to Europe, and Harvey then also, I believe, having difficulty on *Apocalypse Now*, all combined. The people I was working with at the time, we just kept working and whenever I could fit Harvey in, I would always try to get him into a film, but it took a while before I could really give Harvey the right part, and that was Judas in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which was never made. You see, that was the thing we've been working up to. Not *New York, New York* and certainly not *Raging Bull*, because, to put Harvey in *Raging Bull* would have been too much of a reprise of *Mean Streets*. We felt that he understood that, and so we never went that way.

I read in an interview that you had originally intended to have Barry Primus play Charlie to Harvey Keitel's Johnny Boy in Mean Streets.

The story *Mean Streets* was written for Harvey.

As Charlie?

Yeah, as Charlie. But then, that was written in 1966, '67, '68, '69—it was written over a period of over four to five years. A first draft was written in '66 though. I went out to Hollywood and did *Boxcar Bertha* in 1972 and by that time Harvey had been out in Hollywood with me around 1971, and then he went back to New York, and I was trying to get the film off the ground, and I believe we turned around and tried to make a switch. He understood that at the time. I offered it to Barry, and Barry was doing a play called *The Creation of the World*, or something like that, I forget the exact title, but it was by Arthur Miller. It was a play that didn't do very well. We were even thinking at one point of having Barry do the film in the daytime and do the play at night. And then, he just backed out. I said, 'Let me call Harvey and see if he's still interested' and, I believe this is what happened, I don't recall, but I know that there was never a feeling that Harvey said, 'Gee, you didn't choose me again.' You know, that kind of thing. I said, 'Harve, it was written for you originally. What do you want to do?' So he said yes he would get involved. Even then, though, at a certain point, we had to think twice about using him because the money was tight, and we were trying to get the picture made. That was the key thing. He knew how much that film meant to me. And if it was a semi-star name, or if it was someone who had some experience in Hollywood, like Barry Primus had, or like a Jon Voigt also, then it would have actually solidified the picture being made. He understood that I had to go that way. He left it open that way for me. In fact, too, the day we started shooting, the second unit, of the festival in the streets, he was hanging around, and then we got the final 'no' from Jon Voigt, and I put the coat on Harvey and told him to go into the street. He understood that. He was really open about that. He said that 'if you can get the picture made by using Barry Primus, or later on, Jon Voigt, go ahead and do it, I'll do a different part.' He was going to play Tony or something like that.

Was De Niro always going to be Johnny Boy then?

Yes. Well, not always, until I met Bob. I met him in 1970. I knew him before then, but I knew him under different cir-

cumstances. I met him professionally in 1970, and from there on in, I saw him as Johnny Boy.

Because of the four films with De Niro, you've been very closely associated with him. Yet two of the films, I've read, were originally intended by him to be directed by Michael Cimino—Raging Bull and King of Comedy.

No, *Raging Bull* was me. From the beginning. He gave me the book. It was kind of an odd book, like a vanity press book. You know, a strange book, you couldn't really believe everything that was in it, kind of trashy, but very interesting in many different ways. The book spurred on that interest. We kept that. It was given to me, I think, in 1974 and the film was made in 1979. Then *King of Comedy*, he gave me originally back in 1974 also. How *King of Comedy* came to Bob, I forget, I think through Paul Zimmerman. He gave that one to me and I rejected it. I said I didn't want anything to do with it because I felt it was like a one-line gag and I didn't get it. Then, over the years, as I went through my own thing, my own transformation from some sort of obscurity to some sort of success, of working in film and then going from one side of the camera to the other, from one side of the newspaper to another, I became aware of both sides of the issue, of wanting to be something and then becoming something. In other words, having a goal and then reaching a goal, a major goal of your life, and what it was like before that and what it was like after. By the time Bob gave it to me a second time we were finishing *Raging Bull* in 1979. He asked me to read the script again. By that time, he had given it to Cimino and they were working on doing it. Cimino backed out and he gave it to me. I said, 'Well, I'll read it again.' When I read it again, I understood it clearer because I had gone through five or six years of that transformation. And so we thought it would be a kind of quick, easy film to make. Of course, it wasn't.

In an interview for Positif in 1978 you stated that all your films were concerned with the question of 'How to Survive.' Looking at the films since Taxi Driver, the acquisition of fame and celebrity status seems to represent another major theme in your work. Jimmy Doyle, Jake La Motta, and Rupert Pupkin are similar in their overwhelming ambition to become successes, no matter the cost. Would you agree?

I don't know. Hearing a statement I made like that in 1978, in France . . . I don't know. I don't know if I was right. I guess you people tell me what the themes are and then I'll say, 'Gee, that's interesting. That's what the themes are.' I don't know. For example, there may not be that much difference in my mind between survival and becoming a success. Now, becoming a success can mean many different things. In terms of Jimmy Doyle, it's his music, but there's also, in terms of *Raging Bull*, in terms of Jake La Motta, there's another kind of transcending it at the end, a sort of redemption, of coming to terms with himself, which is like a spiritual success, I hope. There are many different kinds of success. The interesting one is Rupert Pupkin just becoming a success on *The Tonight Show*. I think that's interesting because that's the whole value, that's the whole system, the way . . . I'm going to start preaching . . . but it's very much the way all the values, I shouldn't say only of this country, but all of this Western thought, this kind of materialism and this lack of spirituality in our lives that makes the common person in the street want to be on television. I tend to think that there's a fundamental lack of spiritual life.

The price paid for achieving success by your protagonists seems

to be the impossibility of their leading ordinary lives, of being 'normal.' The King of Comedy especially foregrounds that renunciation in the characters of both Rupert Pupkin and Jerry Langford. In that film, you seemed to be suggesting the emptiness of achieved fame. This appears quite different from New York, New York, where you seemed more sympathetic to the artist's need to succeed. Does this reflect a similar shift in your own perceptions of success?

What it means to succeed in New York, New York is one thing, but the path he chooses, the path Jimmy Doyle chooses is a much tougher path to success. He has less people . . . he's going to be less popular. He's got to be happy with it, although he probably never will be. But that's life. That's what you choose to do and that's it. Like the kind of pictures I make. They're not going to bring in the megabucks and that's my problem, and I deal with it, you know, I keep saying to myself every time, every 20 minutes during the day, 'Ah, maybe I should make *Gremlins*.' And maybe, you know, I should make a lot of money as if you're going to make one movie and that's the film that's going to make a lot of money. And then I say, if I want to make a lot of money, I'll make a lot of money. Evidently there's something in me that doesn't get satisfied with that. And so, I'm stuck.

What was the first part of the question . . . ?

About people having to give up being 'normal' . . .

Oh, well, I don't think so. I don't know what normal means, first of all. If it's the average American family, that's about as

. . . I don't know what that is. I don't know anything or anybody like that. Normal is like people in Woody Allen films, I like Woody Allen films. People in Woody Allen films, for example, are, like, people who read the *New Yorker* magazine. It's as foreign to me as *Yol*, you know what I'm saying? Turks, Turkish movies. I mean people who live that way, I don't know, I guess I know them from friends of mine at the Museum of Modern Art, and that sort of thing, I guess, but I don't live like that. I just don't live the way I used to live, down on the lower East Side. So, I'm between everything, I'm in my own sphere.

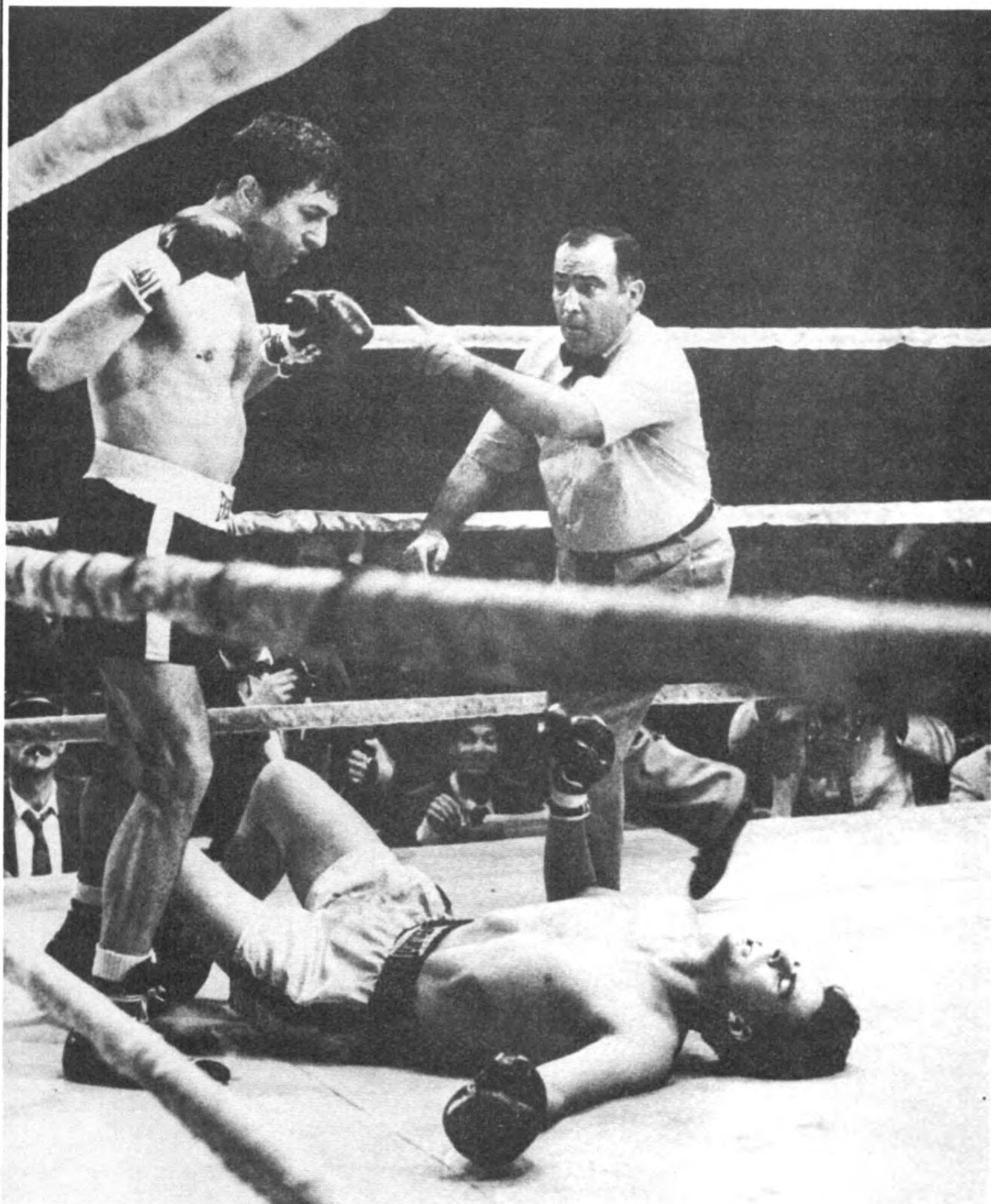
'Normal' . . . I think, you see, what's interesting is that they may be striving for this 'success,' but when they get there they don't see the emptiness because, I'm talking, like before, there's a lack of spiritual thought. A lack of a kind of continuity of spiritual thought. I mean, in the West Coast, you have cultism in a sense, and in the East Coast, at least you have something for the intellect, but still nothing for the spirit.

From the little information I've been able to find on it, The Last Temptation of Christ would appear to have also been concerned with the same kind of ideas. I haven't read the book, but is that correct? Does it have to do with what you have to give up?

I don't know. The book is Kazantzakis' ideas. I thought it was pretty interesting. It has to do with the last temptation itself, being tempting Jesus off the cross by telling him that

Robert De Niro, Amy Robinson and Harvey Keitel in *Mean Streets*.





De Niro as Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull*.

God didn't want him to go through the entire sacrifice just the way Abraham didn't have to go through with Isaac. And your reward is that now you live the life of a normal man. You can have a family, you can have a marriage, you can just live and die happily in bed, and live to a ripe old age, and he goes, 'Oh God, I don't have to be . . . it's terrific. I knew that he would come through for me in the end. I don't have to go through with it. It's terrific.' And actually, *that* is the last temptation. Not sex, not world power, just the life of an ordinary man that God almost envies because life is such a special gift.

Is it made contemporary?

It's set in biblical times. The point, of course, is, that he wakes up at the last minute and he overcomes temptation and dies on the cross. So the sacrifice does continue; he completes it and becomes the messiah.

Your version of it, would it have been also biblical?

Yeah. Our version of it would have been the version of the book by Kazantzakis.

It's really too bad that it didn't go through.

Yeah, it's a mess. It's a terrible situation.

Who was going to play Jesus?

Well, we had chosen a number of people, but finally the last choice was Aidan Quinn.

There has been considerable interest in film theory concerning identification procedures, how the viewer identifies with the character on screen. One distinguishing characteristic of all your films with De Niro is the inclusion of at least one scene that is excruciatingly painful for the viewers, that makes them cringe with embarrassment. I'm thinking of scenes like the 'Up Club' from New York, New York, or the 'weekend at Jerry's' from King of Comedy. How do you feel about these moments?

Oh, they're awful. Absolutely awful.

Do you cringe, too?

Absolutely. You know, I don't look at those films. *New York, New York* I haven't seen since it opened. I will not look at that picture. But then again, I think it has something to do with my personal life at the time. I wasn't in such a very good mood. And therefore, I don't want to relive what I went through at the time. And also, *King of Comedy* kind of had a personal . . . my personal life . . . The memories about the making of the film weren't good, except for the actual making of the film. The actual times I worked with the actors, that was good, in the *King of Comedy*. I enjoyed that. I could look at those scenes in *King of Comedy* and it doesn't make me cringe. I don't like looking at the whole film, though.

I didn't mean the whole movie. I only meant those scenes.

Well, the whole picture makes me cringe. It really does. Just that one particular scene, I could look at the scene out of context, where he goes to the house because it's so funny, it's so awful, it's so embarrassing, it's so excruciating, so painful, and therefore, it exorcises a kind of, what's the word, a kind of catharsis in a way. I could just laugh about it. I could look at that scene from time to time, but I really don't like to look at the whole piece from beginning to end. Not as opposed to *After Hours*, where I could watch the whole thing from

beginning to end and laugh a great deal because the poor guy is trying to be decent. It gets very, very funny.

Well, he seems to be the most normal of all the characters you have . . .

That's why he gets shaken up. That's why he goes through that fucking night. That's why he gets it from us.

Just to get back to these particular moments, for one more minute. I wondered about the scenes, not King of Comedy, because maybe that whole film also is embarrassing, but the ones that appear in the rest of the films. Are they conscious strategies on your part to estrange the viewer from the protagonist, to distance the person watching from identifying too much?

I don't think so. No, not from identifying, I don't understand any of that stuff. I want people to identify with everything. I want them to understand and see those scenes and say, 'Yes, I've been there. And maybe I won't be able to watch right now but, boy, I know what those feelings are and boy, how did they get that. It's so interesting because it's so real.' The feelings there are so universal in a sense, there are things that you don't normally see in pictures. And yeah, I want the audience with it, I don't want to scare away the audience in any of the parts of the movie, I like for them to see it, basically. They should pay money and see the picture or buy a cassette and watch it over and over again.

I have a friend, an Italian-Canadian, whose favorite film is Raging Bull, but he can hardly bear to sit through it. He compares it to an 'ordeal.' For him, it's a kind of penance, performed in a movie theatre, to paraphrase Mean Streets.

Oh, really. I don't look at *Raging Bull* either. The whole picture . . . not because it's embarrassing . . .

No, it's a very painful film . . . Is that the kind of response you want from the audience, something that's so painful to them, that they love it and hate it at the same time?

No, I just want them to feel that it's truthful, that's all. And then they could deal with the truth. If they want to look at it, they look at it. If they don't want to look at it, what can I say? At least they've seen it once, hopefully. I don't blame them. Sometimes it's like a pummeling, that film, I don't want to deal with that. I like looking at bits and pieces of it over and over again, that's quite something. But the whole piece, beginning to end, I haven't seen since it opened.

During an interview on Raging Bull, you referred to Jake's cry from the cell, 'I'm not that guy!', as being crucial to an understanding of his redemption. To what extent are you 'not that guy' up there on the screen? Do you or can you disengage yourself from the protagonists of your films?

I don't know if I can. I think one of the nice things that worked out with De Niro and myself is that we were able to grow together creatively during those five pictures that we made. The first one, *Mean Streets*, I wanted him in that part. The second one, *Taxi Driver*, we sort of came together through the subject matter and the circumstances at the time. And then by the time we did *New York, New York*, and experimenting there . . . and by the time we finally got together and did *Raging Bull*—because I didn't think I was going to do it for a period of five years, I was going on and off about it—by the time I did *Raging Bull*, I really locked in, I think that's the best thing me and De Niro ever did because

we were almost like the same person. I'd turn left, he'd turn left, I'd turn right, he'd turn right, he'd turn right, I'd turn right, that sort of thing. We just knew. We didn't have to communicate, we just simply knew . . . telepathy.

Can you disengage yourself from the person up there?

No, probably not.

Since King of Comedy, you haven't made a film with De Niro. Do you plan to do another one in the future, or is that something that's been worked out?

I don't know. I think Bob and I, to a certain extent, have worked out certain things. After *King of Comedy*, I didn't see where else we could go. He could do another gangster picture with Sergio Leone, let's say, or with somebody else, but for me to do another gangster picture, it would have to be with somebody else. Together, we did it. We did it a couple of times. What else are we going to find from that? So the thing, the trick for me and Bob now is, for the two of us, not for other people to send us scripts, not for other people to send us books, to be generated from the outside. But for the two of us to sit together every now and then whenever we're in the same damn city together, whenever that is, because it's very difficult these days, but whenever we are, to get together as much as possible to hang around, talk and see what the hell was interesting us, and maybe we want to check in with a movie we want to make, hopefully, in a few years and then 10 years from now, if we're alive, check in on that, too. Check in on how we're feeling about it then. See about making another picture. Hopefully we'll have the power to get a picture like that made, which I would think would be a 'personal' picture, you know what I'm saying? The interesting thing about making films in America, though, is it's got to be—even the personal films have got to be—worked within the commercial genre. It's like a chess game. It would be too easy to just go off and make a film and not have to worry about selling it. That's the problem.

What was working for Steven Spielberg's "Amazing Stories" like, where you were working in the commercial medium?

I did that as a discipline. To discipline myself to make a film very quickly.

Did you have any input in the actual story?

Not really, no. It was Steve's story. He told me at dinner one night. He said he was going to direct it, but if I wanted to do it, I could do it. I said, 'Oh, great, I'll do it.' That's how he got me. Then he got all the other directors, too, from that. He said, "Marty's doing one." "Oh, okay, we'll do one." He caught me that way, because he told the story. It was a great story, I thought. It was funny. And then they wrote the script and basically, I just changed the script a little bit here and there, that's all. And just basically tried to get something that's disciplined, with the least amount of control as possible and still see if I could survive in the making of it.

How did you feel working in the horror genre?

Oh, I love it.

You did? It's so different from all your other films.

I don't think so.

I don't mean the content, but I meant, in terms of using make-

up and special effects and all that stuff, the monsters . . .

Oh, that, make-up and stuff, I don't know, the monsters, I don't know about that. I just made him look like the professor in *The House of Wax*, I thought that was funny. I liked that, with the cloak and the hat. I thought that was fun and the lighting, we really didn't have time to play around with the lighting on the monster. But what the really interesting aspect about that half-hour show was the camera moves and the idea of the piece of a man slowly losing his mind, a man who is having a nervous breakdown. And have tight camera angles and moves. There was hardly any dialogue in the piece. And the comforting that the Helen Shaver character tries to give him. Those are the really interesting scenes. I don't know. Has anybody seen it?

It was advertised here in Toronto, in TV Guide. It gave you a credit for it, and so people I know watched it.

Oh, I see. So somebody *did* see it.

Yeah, some people have seen it.

The problem is that "Amazing Stories" didn't do well. NBC put it on too late in the season. It was anticlimactic by that point. If they had put it on earlier, when expectations were higher, it might have done better. We would have gotten a bigger blurb in the TV guide and things like that. And people would have known that I did it. Even though they put my name in there, it didn't have a special little Close-up section and that sort of thing, where people would say, 'Oh, there's the one.' Because everybody kept asking, 'When's it going to be shown?' By the time it was shown, people missed it.

It's really too bad. Maybe they'll re-run it over the summer.

Yeah.

After the unfortunate experience of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, all the projects you've worked on have been initiated by other people: *After Hours* by Amy Robinson and Griffin Dunne, *The Color of Money* by Paul Newman, *Mirror, Mirror* by Steven Spielberg. Has this made any difference to you in terms of your approach to these films? Are they less personal as a result?

Scorsese with Griffin Dunne on the set of *After Hours*.



No, I don't think so. But again, it's you people who tell me that. In a sense I just try to get the most personal kind of film made within this Hollywood system because I'm an American. I can't go over to Italy and England and France and make pictures. Yes, I could. I physically could. They would probably be good films, but I don't know the language, I don't know, I can't hear it in my ear, you know what I'm saying? I mean, there'd be something intrinsically missing, unless I'm doing *Anna Karenina* or something, where it's a different thing. Then it's purely a job as a director where it's almost like just pure *mise-en-scène*, where you tell the person to move from there to there, which is the thing I hate. I hate that the most.

I was going to ask before about whether you could make a film about a protagonist with whom you had nothing in common, like Anna Karenina. I guess, unless you could find something . . .

Yes, I think I could, but then I would be taking the role of a real director. And I really don't want to be a director.

What do you want to be?

I just want to be a filmmaker. An American filmmaker, and I just try to make my films. And if, for example, I could utilize Paul Newman, and if he could utilize me, we would both mutually get something out of it. Then it's the best of both possible worlds, which I think the new picture, *The Color of Money* is that way.

It is? Even though it wasn't yours to begin with, you feel that you've really got your touch on it?

I think that I've got my touch on it. That's what I liked about it. And at the same time he's got his and then we just came together with it. And we got Richard Price, I got him involved, and with Richard Price, the three of us worked on the script for a year, before we decided even to make the picture.

You've just finished working on it now?

Yeah. We're finishing the fine cut right now.

When will it be released?

Christmas. It's my first Christmas movie.

Not until then? Is it a 'Christmas Movie'?

No. It's a Christmas movie in terms of performance. Paul Newman is terrific, he is great. Tom Cruise is terrific, Helen Shaver is wonderful, Mary-Elizabeth Mastrantonio, I mean everybody is just great. It's a nice movie. As I say, I have some projects that are generated by me and if they can't get made, in the meantime the trick is to try to find, I think, staying within the limitations, the limitation being I'm an American, and not wanting to go make, immediately anyway for now, to make pictures in Europe, then you have to stay within the game plan here. One of the ways of staying within the game plan is to see if a major star can get something out of you, and you can get something out of a major star. The other thing is doing something so low budget, like *After Hours*, and so unique and so different, so unique in the sense that it's hardly like anything else made, that it's going to get some attention.

Well, it certainly got you the attention in Cannes.

Yeah, it did! I was very pleased.

Were you?

Yeah, sure. They can give me any award, I'm pleased. I'll take any award.

To get that kind of recognition . . .

The funny thing is, 10 years ago I got the Grand Prize. But I wasn't there either.

What happened 10 years ago?

Well, 10 years ago, we arrived and we only did a day's worth of work, a day and a half worth of work. Tennessee Williams was the head of the jury and he came out and said in print, in one of the periodicals that come out every day in Cannes, that he felt that *Taxi Driver* was too violent a film. He hated it. He was the head of the jury, so we left. A week later they called up in the morning and said we won the Grand Prize. So it must be good luck not being there.

So for next year when The Color of Money comes out . . .

Oh, I don't know. These days travelling all around kills me.

Your appearance in your films has become a kind of trademark, like Alfred Hitchcock's. However, unlike his, yours are integral to the narrative. Each appearance seems to have been carefully selected to reflect on the action, especially your playing the director in King of Comedy, or moving the spotlights in After Hours. Was this intentional from the beginning, or did it just develop?

No, it just developed. Me doing the director in *King of Comedy* was Tony Randall's idea. He was going to get his agent to do it but the guy didn't show up in the morning and Tony came up with, 'But I have a wonderful idea.' 'So what is it, Mr. Randall, what is it?' Because I love Tony Randall, anything he does, he opens his mouth, I laugh, I love it. And he said, 'You play the director.' And my heart dropped and I said, 'Sure. Anything you want.' I was like a victim. What could I do. I went out there and I did it. You could even see me, I'm a little embarrassed. I'm laughing through the whole thing. Actually I thought the lines are very funny about being shot by the firing squad, I thought it was very funny. He said, 'Did you think it was funny?' I said, 'Yes, I did think it was funny.' That's it. That's how I did that. And also at that time, Tony Randall was a favorite of some close friends of mine, that's one of the reasons I had him in the film also and I thought they would have gotten a kick out of me playing a scene with him and that was that. And in this one, *After Hours*, I chose to do the part with the spotlights because of the fact that he was like the fellow in charge of the marionettes, pulling the strings.

Hitchcock just appeared and it was sort of a gimmick to try and figure out where he was, but not with you . . .

Oh, no, no. I wouldn't presume to do that, no. If I'm going to be in something it's going to have to be a little bit of an integral part for me, or my voice. For my own reasons, I have to either appear in my film or speak in it.

In Taxi Driver you appear twice, once as an observer . . .

The observer was supposed to be my little walk-on and then when my friend who was supposed to play the part, George Memmoli, a very heavy guy, he just died last year as a result



De Niro in *Taxi Driver*.

of what happened right before he was supposed to be in *Taxi Driver*. He was supposed to play the part of the guy in the cab and what happened was he was in another movie and he did a stunt and broke his head and ever since then he was never quite together. He died last year from it. I had to play the part because I couldn't find anyone else to do it.

Are you in The Color of Money, too?

Just one quick shot. I think my voice might be in, it might be in a very integral place.

Do you have any future plans? Is there anything in the works for you now, after The Color of Money? Are you planning that far in advance?

Well, it's hard to talk about it. I'm always trying to get *The Last Temptation* made, but I think that's going to be put in abeyance.

Is there still a possibility for that?

Well, the way I look at it, there's always a possibility, but we're talking maybe five years, ten years, who knows? I'd just like to get it out of my system, I don't think it's going to be the greatest picture ever made, I don't think it's going to be my best work. I just want to do it, that's all.

Did Paul Schrader write that? Is that his script?

Yeah, he wrote that too.

Is there anything else you could talk about in terms of future films?

No, not really. Usually, we revise scripts, myself, with some friends at times. But there's no credit for that, though. But the other projects, I usually like to keep kind of quiet, the ones we're going to try to do. You never know these past days . . . years. It's a little bit hard.

I just want to back up for a little bit and ask you questions about the early films. You've discussed the two early films that you did, Who's That Knocking at My Door and Mean Streets, as fragments of your youth. They are particularly informed with religious iconography. I'm thinking of an image such as JR at the end of Who's That Knocking, bleeding from the mouth after kissing the feet of a religious statue . . .

Oh, one of the worst things, terrible. You know what it was supposed to be? It was supposed to be a full life-size statue of Jesus which he kisses on the feet. And then when he comes up, there was supposed to be blood coming out of his mouth or just blood from the feet. And we never had it. We couldn't get the church. There was a stupid little plastic thing on the wall and the blood didn't come out of the mouth right. It was a mess. I was embarrassed by it.

. . . Or in Charlie holding his finger over a lighted match in Mean Streets.

Yeah, that's something. That's part of that retreat business. That also comes from James Joyce and the retreat in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. There's a lot of references to that, cross-references, all that stuff.

To what extent is all the religious imagery you use reflective of your own attempts to come to terms with Catholicism?

Well, I think you probably answered your own question.

Charlie in Mean Streets seems to be seeking redemption through self-inflicted punishment—again the lighted matches, votive candles, taking care of Johnny Boy. Taxi Driver picks up on similar religious imagery—Travis' hand held over a flame, references to hell, Betsey as angel, Iris' room filled with candles.

Oddly enough, that image of the hand held over the flame came directly from Schrader's script for *Taxi Driver*. You see, that's why I said it's almost as if I'd written it. He's a Calvinist and I'm a Roman Catholic—it's very interesting. That image was Paul's; mine (the lighted matches) was in *Mean Streets*.

Can the massacre at the end of the film be seen as a catharsis purifying Travis? Is there any chance of redemption for him?

Oh, I don't know, I never thought of that. I mean I never thought of that, of course I've thought of it. But what I'm saying is that Schrader has his own ideas about that and I have mine, I guess. It's like a catharsis, yes, but at the same time he's like a time bomb just waiting to go off again. That's what I always felt.

So it's a really open ending?

It's an open ending because I just think it will happen again and again and again. He's not the only one that it's going to happen to, too. In New York yesterday a guy on the Staten Island Ferry just killed two people with a knife and injured 11. Before he attacked them he said, 'Viva Islam.' He's a Cuban refugee and he is also evidently mad, schizophrenic, who was let out. So this you have almost everyday happen.

It's just part of everyday life then.

Well, in a way. It doesn't mean that there's no reason for it. The reasons with each person change. And who knows what the reasons are, really, I don't know. I just think the catharsis . . . a blood letting of that kind, I don't think it's ever fully quenched. Do you?

When people write about you, they often talk about the dichotomy with the gangster/priest—that is, growing up in Little Italy, you could have been a gangster or a priest. It interests me that what you chose to do was to be an artist instead.

I think it's a combination of both.

How much more difficult was it to be an artist, then?

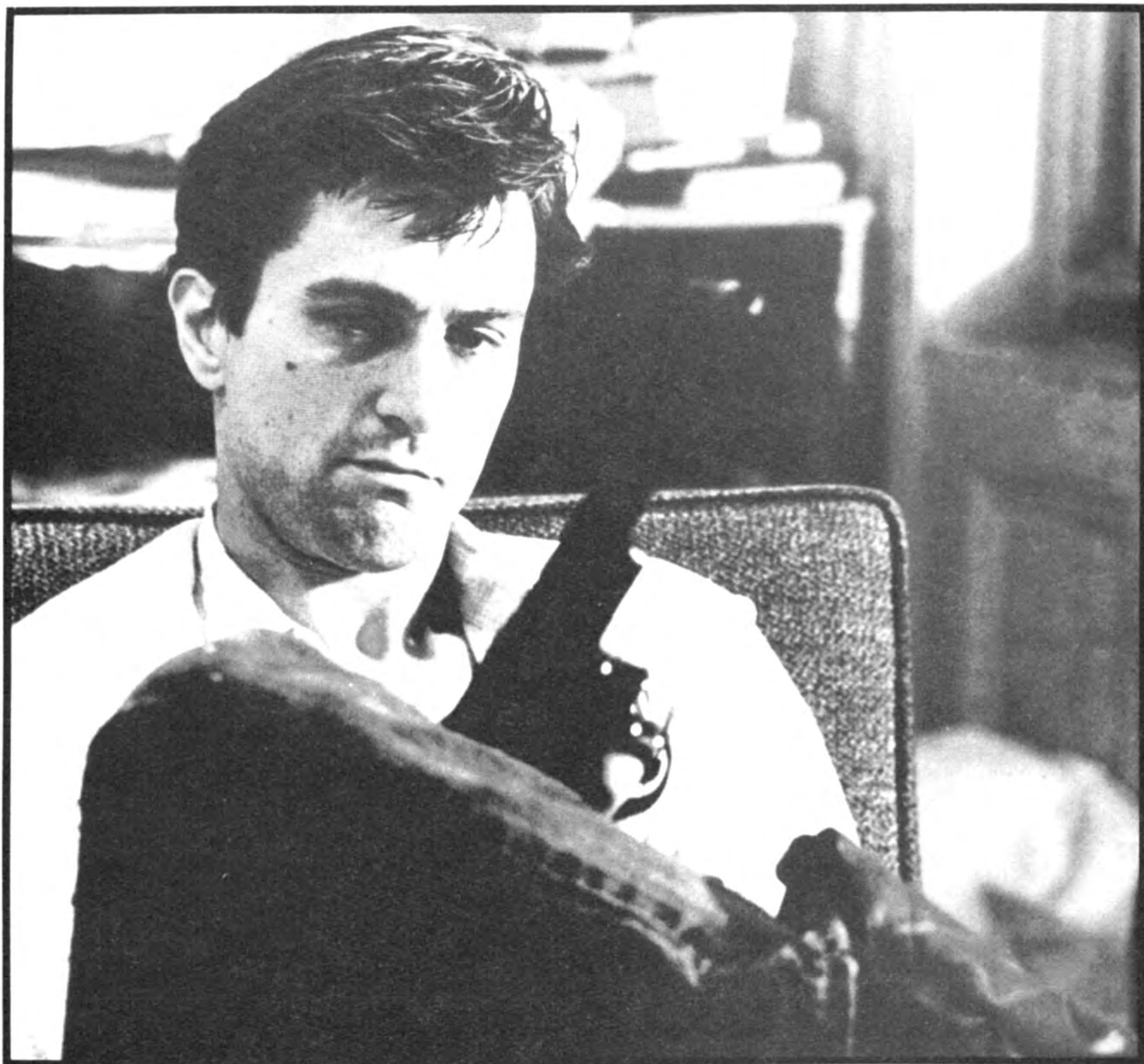
I think probably just as difficult as the others.

Yes. It seems to me, especially culturally, I should imagine.

I mean, artist, I don't know. They say 'artist,' so, I think it's just as bad. Just as hard, a combination of the two. □

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Bernard Hashmall and Anna Barbisan in the taping and transcription of this interview.

The Narrative of Alienation: Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*



Travis Bickle/Robert De Niro: the hero as figure of alienation.

by David Weaver

THERE IS AN ATTEMPT MADE AT THE VERY beginning of Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* to establish what might be thought of as the narrative perimeters or boundaries of the entire film: a taxi cab swerves across the screen in slow-motion—leaving in its wake the title credit—and immediately thereafter comes an extreme close-up of the eyes of Travis Bickle/Robert De Niro, which, in turn, is succeeded by a shot of a New York City street at night. This progression of shots (which is developed further with a second cut from Bickle's gaze, this time to an image of people crossing the street) is a relatively orthodox construction of character perspective or 'point of view' as can be found throughout the history of the cinema, dating back at least as far as Kuleshov's famous experiment in associative montage editing with footage of the actor Mozhukin. The experiment was simple: Kuleshov screened a shot of the expressionless Mozhukin juxtaposed with various other images, such as a child, a bowl of soup and so on, discovering in the process that the audience read the actor's expression in accordance with whichever shot followed it in sequence. This experiment—which could be considered as taking place on the most rudimentary level of film narrative possible (composed of only the viewing subject and the looked-at object)—confirmed for Kuleshov the power of editing and of montage; but it can also be interpreted as demonstrating the ambiguity of the actor's naked gaze, which provides a link with the shot of Bickle/De Niro described above. Yet if this shot sequence from *Taxi Driver* in some sense recalls the seminal investigations made into the nature of montage by Kuleshov, it also evokes the anxiety which was the eventual product of those investigations in certain quarters; that is, the concern that intrinsic in the process of montage (and indeed in the fragmentation that is editing in general) was evidence of a profound alienation, a deformation of the (potential) unity of reality, and which has as its final result the severing of the character from his or her surrounding environment. It is in the writings of André Bazin that this anxiety receives its fullest articulation, and it is Bazin's Catholicism that suggests that he viewed the evolution of montage—and especially Kuleshov's seminal experiment which is mentioned in a number of his essays—as a sort of cinematic fall from grace, with the post-war ascent of neo-realism as the redemption of film.¹ But *Taxi Driver* is not a neo-realist text (although it does make use of some neo-realist narrative strategies) and Scorsese employs the anxiety of the cut, and of the truncated gaze, to construct a dichotomy of subject (Bickle, as yet unnamed) and other (the city specifically, but actually everything outside of his taxi) which serves as the organizing principle for the narrative which is to follow. Thus the placement of this sequence of shots prior to the introduction of the narrative proper privileges it as an expression of a general alienated state, a state that the rest of the film could be seen as attempting to depict in detail.

It has been noted elsewhere that there is a confusion of narrative impulses or drives at work in *Taxi Driver*, and I think that much of the power and fascination of the film is a direct consequence of its inability to determine precisely the psychological (or even epistemological) status of its subject/narrator, its attitude towards him within the diegesis, and the

exact meaning of his alienation.² Thus despite any appearances otherwise—such as the apparently controlling voice of the narrator, the frequent association of the camera with his perspective on the action—I am arguing that *Taxi Driver* does not unproblematically portray the consciousness of its central character, and that it refuses to simply be a record of the development of his psychosis. The reason for this is that there are two separate notions of alienation advanced by the narrative, and neither of these notions ever manages to achieve more than a momentary prominence, or to cohere or balance with its briefly suppressed twin, thereby denying the possibility of a consistent characterization of Travis Bickle. The first of these must be broadly related to a Christian or Western tradition of thought: stated simply, it is an understanding of alienation which posits a hierarchical condition of totality or plenty from which the subject has either been expelled—as for example in the archetypal Biblical narrative of "Genesis"—or has somehow inexplicably lost spiritual or emotional contact with. In this structure, the actions of the subject are continually oriented towards regaining the lost totality, and the eventual submersion (and negation) of personal identity in it. The effect of this structure is to reduce the world of phenomena to a compendium of signifiers representing this elusive totality, and to make the subject's estrangement conditional on his or her ability to successfully decipher these signs: therefore making alienation a provisional state with recovery always conceivable, though always deferred onto another realm.

The second notion of alienation present in *Taxi Driver* is somewhat easier to elucidate, since it consists of a very generalized idea of the alienated state which is probably loosely derived from the tenets of existentialism. Its position is this: that the fundamental human condition is one of estrangement, both from other people and from all systems of order, with the result that the onus is placed on the individual to produce meaning in a world which is insensitive to his or her existence in it. Although the film does not acknowledge it, there is an enormous divergence between these two concepts of alienation, the principle difference being that in the traditional understanding it is possible to move beyond the alienated state and reclaim the totality or wholeness of being at some further point, while in the second understanding this state is designated as an attribute of consciousness. In other words with the first concept Travis Bickle's viewing of the street in the opening shots is an active attempt to bridge the subject/other dichotomy, but with the second concept his gaze merely confirms the insuperability of the breach.

The film moves quickly after the credits to consolidate the impression of estrangement that is first created by Bickle's gaze. There is a brief tracking shot which follows him into the dispatch office of the cab company, and the camera remains affiliated with him throughout the brief interrogation he undergoes while applying for work. It is in this scene that the film develops a number of parallels between Travis Bickle and the Ethan Edwards/John Wayne character of John Ford's *The Searchers*: both are initially shown through doorways and both are wearing the uniforms—or part of the uniform—of a losing army; both are alone and both possess pasts which are left conspicuously unspecified.³ However,

while Edwards' disaffected character and enigmatic background are coded in *The Searchers* as signifying his fortitude and his heroic stature (though this stature by no means goes unquestioned in the film), these elements are supplanted completely in *Taxi Driver* by a series of attributes mentioned in this scene—the inability to sleep, the nervous demeanor, the disheveled appearance, and so on—which function to suggest Bickle as a recognizable 'modern' (rather than mythic) type: the urban neurotic. The question here is therefore primarily one of genre: Edwards embodies the genre conventions of the film Western and the mythology of the settling of the American West on which it is based, but Bickle in contrast is associated through imagery, music, and style of acting with the genre of film noir which is exemplified by varying degrees of cynicism and repugnance towards society. Each genre presents a specific construct of alienation. In the epic Western the emotional complexities of the masculine characters are sublimated to the demands of establishing a community, and indeed the epic frequently implies that this sublimation is in fact the foundation upon which the achievement of civilization rests (this is also apparent in other forms of the epic: witness Virgil's *Aeneid*). *The Searchers* is an occasionally quite radical variation of this thematic, particularly because the film seems unable to fully integrate Edwards' obsessive and alienated personality into its system of bourgeois values; and yet it is made abundantly clear that individuals of his sort are essential to the continued operation of the system as a whole. Thus the concept of alienation is recuperated for the values it is superficially depicted as opposing; it therefore appears that the first understanding of alienation as outlined above is applicable to this kind of narrative. In the film noir these distinctions are simply not made, since the characters are generally portrayed in situations where the bourgeois values invoked are either obviously bankrupt or corrupt or inadequate, and there is literally no social order capable of appropriating the 'force' (for lack of a better word) of alienation to its own purposes. If this quality of estrangement is subsumed into the social order in the epic, then it is intensified, redoubled in film noir, often times through the device of voice-over narration by the central character (as, for example, in Wilder's *Double Indemnity*). In *Taxi Driver*, the voice-over commences with the scene following Bickle's interview in the cab office when he is shown sitting at a desk in his room writing in his diary, and it continues over a number of close-ups of a taxi and then a shot of Bickle driving. A series of small displacements occur during this sequence: the beginning of the narration produces the expectation that some insight into Bickle's background will be granted, that the narration will supply the necessary psychological details for greater understanding of the character, and further that the narration will express the quasi-existential despair common to film noir texts. These are certainly the usual functions of narration in film noir. But instead what is spoken in this scene is a ferocious, mock-Biblical diatribe against those whom Bickle has designated as depraved and as other: "All the animals come out at night Someday a *real* rain will wash the scum off the streets." The latter statement is especially interesting given the absence of the first person singular pronoun: it is not a statement of intent, for there is no human subject undertaking the action, but rather the prognostication of an intervention on the part of some unspecified transcendental agency (the symbol of rain, of course, being a traditional Biblical/Christian figure). It is at this point that there is an apparent gap between how Bickle views his alienated state—which is, as precipitated by the (unknown) others of the city who are guilty of 'sin' and

who have corrupted the ideal of society—and his actual condition as a casualty of the absence of an ascertainable or verifiable moral order. Again, two very separate notions of alienation lie behind this division.

Bickle's displacement of his own subjectivity in the narration continues: "Damn days go on and on, they don't end. I don't believe that someone should devote his life to morbid self-attention, I believe that someone should become a person like other people." Although the personal pronoun is present in these sentences, there is a definite gap between it and the active subject whose impersonality is doubly emphasized with the use of the word "someone." The narration in this instance is more like a form of Romantic longing to achieve acceptance in the ranks of normality than it is like the introspective discourse of alienation. This speech comes after we have watched Bickle tentatively attempt to make contact with a woman working the refreshment counter at a porn theatre; he asks her name and is rebuffed, clearly not comprehending—as later he will not on his date with Betsy—that the bourgeois value system to which he aspires will not recognize or admit the side of its economy that is its repressed, in this case, pornography; that is to say, Bickle does not realize the quality of alienation contained within the value system he conceives of as a perfect wholeness.

The logic of the narrative, then, becomes even more evident with the introduction immediately thereafter of Betsy/Cybill Shepherd: the film works by instituting a succession of binary oppositions which it then acts to disturb or disrupt. After he is rejected by the woman in the porn theatre—a place for the construction of masculine images of sexuality—Bickle goes on to create his vision of the ideal woman, one who is directly identified with images of the transcendent (note again how the negative/alienated value is recuperated to a supposedly positive/bourgeois value): "She appeared like an angel out of this filthy mess She was wearing a white dress She is alone: they cannot touch her." The film mirrors Bickle's attempt to construct her as an archetypal figure of purity by shooting her in 'poetic' slow-motion, adding the sounds of harp strings on the audio-track, withholding her name until later in the narrative, and, most importantly, detaching her from the scrutiny of Bickle's gaze (we only know he has seen her because he tells us so). Thus Betsy—elevated to an absolute level—comes to represent all of the values that Bickle so desires to make contact with, but like those values she is perpetually just out of reach, meaning that Bickle, it seems, can only possess her through his gaze. Indeed, when Betsy first takes notice of him, it is because of his insistent attention: "Look over there [she says to her co-worker, Tom/Albert Brooks]. That taxi driver's been staring at us." And because Betsy is essentially constructed out of Bickle's gaze, there is a strange sort of narrative logic to him taking her to a porn theatre when they go out. When she refuses to see him again, this transcendent image is completely inverted; he shouts at her: "You're in Hell and you're going to die in Hell like the rest of them." And in narration: "I realize now how much she is just like the others—cold and distant. There are many people like that—women for sure. They're like a union." The irony of this dialogue, of course, lies in a character such as Bickle accusing someone else of not being sufficiently 'giving.' With her metamorphosis from seraph to sinner complete, Betsy virtually disappears from the remainder of the film—which suggests the degree to which her narrative existence was dependent on Bickle's attention to her, the degree to which the film is the articulation of his consciousness—and only returns momentarily in a coda, reduced to a "disembodied head floating in Travis"



Bickle's 'failure' with Betsy/Cybill Shepherd.

windscreen mirror."⁴ In this scene it is she who fixes him in her gaze, which, it might be argued, was his desire and his aim all along. In the schema I have discerned in the film, this scene belongs to the first form of alienation, and could be read as equivalent to those moments in Ford's Westerns when the community deigns to recognize the accomplishments and/or power of the alienated individual who is—to an extent—situated in opposition to it. Since the community is the dominant social force, with the capability of marginalizing the potentially threatening or problematic individual, this gesture in no way compromises its value system or its internal unity. Thus Ford's Westerns frequently end with the hero virtually alienated from the community as he was at the beginning of the film, despite the efforts he has expended in guarding it or reconstructing it. There is an element of this, perhaps, in the ending of *Taxi Driver*, where Betsy acknowledges Bickle's actions to 'save' the child-prostitute Iris/Jodie Foster, and especially in the manner that Bickle pulls his cab away from the curb, seemingly repudiating the values Betsy represents when in fact they never truly existed as a possibility for him. This moment, which is registered as both heroic

(his mission accomplished, the hero departs to assist others) and tragic (the hero will never participate in the civilized values of the community) in Ford's films, is revealed as deeply ambiguous at the end of *Taxi Driver*.

This ambiguity is the product of the line of thought in the film which does not recognize any element of volition in alienation—regarding it instead as inherent in consciousness—and which therefore ridicules the idea of heroism as it is found in Ford's film as the fetishizing of a human trait. From the point he is rejected by Betsy onwards, Bickle is frequently referred to as "killer" or "cowboy," usually with some element of mockery or derision. Throughout the sub-plot involving Iris and her pimp Sport/Harvey Keitel, he is continually taken as a police officer or a narcotics agent, again with derision. The effect of these asides is to subvert the heroic/masculine persona which the rest of the film depicts Bickle as carefully constructing. In his voice-over narration, Bickle reads a card he is sending to his parents where he ponderously states: "I am sorry again that I cannot send you my address like I promised to last year, but the sensitive nature of my work for the government demands the

utmost secrecy” Thus the opposition of subject/other that obsessed Bickle through the entire film has extended even to his interior monologue: where he once acted to displace his subjectivity from the narration, he has now constructed a totally different (and other) Travis Bickle who has succeeded in the instances when the actual Bickle failed (as with Betsy, for example). This splitting of the subject occurs because Bickle is incapable of accepting his estrangement from other people as the essential human condition, an attitude which views all actions as specific to the individual and without meaning in any greater spiritual or epistemological context. It is the character of Wizard/Peter Boyle who succinctly summarizes this position in the film: “A man takes a job and that job becomes what he is—you do a thing and that’s what you are . . . because, y’know, you’ve got no choice anyway, we’re all fucked, more or less.” In light of these words, Bickle’s murderous effort to rescue Iris from the underworld becomes in truth an attempt to affront his own state of alienation and affirm that there is a certainty, an order that exists outside of it. And the curious, halting voice—the voice of Iris’ father reading from his letter to Bickle—on the soundtrack towards the end could almost be Bickle’s own voice, promising him that there was a place where values were assured, and that though he was absent from it, its restoration was his accomplishment.

NOTES

1. See Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volumes 1 and 2*, trans. Hugh Gray (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967).
2. See Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 46-69.
3. See David Boyd, “Prisoner of the Night,” *Film Heritage*, Volume 12, Number 2, 1976-77, pp. 24-31.
4. Wood, *Op. Cit.*, p. 52.

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SIRK, SCORSESE, and HYSTERIA: A Double(d) Reading

by Susan Morrison

IT IS THE AIM OF THIS PAPER TO ADDRESS SOME of the issues raised in current film literature concerning Melodrama; specifically, the notion of Hysteria as a determining characteristic both of Melodramatic content—the hysterical protagonist, and Melodramatic form—the hysterical text. To invert the usual i.e. feminist project for this generic problem, we shall take as our subject films which place male protagonists at their centre, Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1957) and Martin Scorsese's *New York, New York* (1977). As these films were produced some 20 years apart, we shall also attempt observations as to the genre's flexibility in relation to context; that is, we shall look for evidence that the Melodrama is/may be adaptable to changing values and societal attitudes.

I

MUCH OF THE RECENT INTEREST in Hollywood Melodramas from the '40s and '50s has centred on the ways in which the genre lays open the problematic position of women in a patriarchal society. Critics such as Laura Mulvey (on *Duel in the Sun*), Griselda Pollock (Dossier on Melodrama), Sheila Whitaker (*It Always Rains on Sunday*), and Tania Modleski (on *Rebecca*),¹ have examined the Melodrama from a feminist point-of-view, foregrounding the form's overwhelming concerns for the blocking of an active female phallic sexuality in favor of a passive femininity. In a society where the only available option for a sexual female is to play the role of wife/mother (a sexuality which is contained socially), this idolized/idealized "passive" femininity guarantees no threat to the established patriarchal order. The Hollywood Melodrama, as a truly popular art form, notoriously conforms to and reflects these structures of bourgeois ideology. Inevitably, we find that filmic female transgressors who will not be recuperated into bourgeois society, who refuse to reject an active sexuality, invariably pay an enormous price. They are abandoned (Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With The Wind* [1939]; shunned (*Harriet Craig* [1950], *Ruby Gentry* [1952]); murdered (Kathy in *Out of the Past* [1946], Pearl in *Duel in the Sun* [1946]); or forced (by the film's strategies) to commit suicide

(*Rebecca* [1940], *Mme. Bovary* [1949], *Angel Face* [1952], *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* [1946]).

In his introduction to *Studies in Hysteria*, Freud maintained that sexuality played a principal part in the pathogenesis of Hysteria.² The repression of sexual ideas from the conscious mind (i.e. the suppression of actual sexual activity) manifested itself in converted form as 'hysterical,' that is, medically unaccountable, somatic symptoms. In the case of Anna O., for example, she exhibited "paraphasia, a convergent squint, severe disturbances of vision, paralyses in the form of contractions."³ As a medical illness, Hysteria (from the Greek word for uterus) was conventionally considered, before Freud, as a woman's disease—even now, 'hysterical female' is a comparatively common epithet in Western society; 'hysterical male,' relatively uncommon.

In Hollywood Melodramas which have female protagonists, the women frequently are characterized by a peculiarly heightened level of excess, manifested in symptoms which come quite close to approximating hysterical symptoms. They function at an intensity far beyond what is considered 'normal': voice, gestures, actions, even dress can accentuate their 'otherness,' their inability and/or lack of desire to belong to the normal world. Rosa Moline, in *Beyond the Forest* (1949) is an excellent example of this filmic phenomenon of the hysterical female. At the beginning of the film, she is pointed out as a somewhat attractive woman who is bored with her circumstances as a small town doctor's wife. By the end of the film, she has become transformed into a grotesque figure, her appearance a virtual travesty of femininity as she totters wobbily along on high heels, her face distorted through illness and poorly applied make-up, in a desperate and ultimately futile attempt to escape her circumstances. The morality of the film's narrative thus requires a process of externalizing her internal 'grotesque' self; in other words, she is duly punished for her illicit desires.

Whereas much work has been done on the Melodrama's presentation of the (impossible) female position in patriarchal society, we find that little attention has been paid to the reverse issue, the position of the male, which just may be as problematic (and impossible) as the female's.



Marylee Hadley (Dorothy Malone) tries to seduce Mitch Wayne (Rock Hudson) in Sirk's *Written on the Wind*.

The process of oedipalisation for a female subject, as we have indicated, demands the *suppression* of her phallic sexuality (aggressive phase) so that she may take her proper place as wife/mother (passive phase). For a male subject, however, the same process requires the *expression* of that phallic sexuality so that he may take his place as husband/father (active phase). In addition, because our society is patriarchal, he must also take the role/place of the Father—in the Lacanian sense—the Law. As the father is also the Father, so the phallus is also the Phallus, symbolic of Power and Authority. A male who, for whatever reason, does not/can not assume this rightful place vis à vis the family and society, who does not thereby wield the Phallus (i.e. is passive), is seen by himself and by society as having lost it, of having been castrated. Frustration at this situation, fraught as it is with fears of impotence and anxiety over castration, can produce in the male symptoms which clearly resemble those Freud noted as characteristic of the hysterical temperament, "... instability of will, changes of mood, increase of excitability, with a diminution of all altruistic feelings,"⁴ symptoms we have already noted as commonly ascribed to hysterical females. Given the above, let us now turn to a close examination of two films which take male subjects as their protagonists, *Written on the Wind* and *New York, New York*, in order to see how Hysteria can articulate and motivate melodramatic content and melodramatic form.

While *Written on the Wind*, as one of Douglas Sirk's more autographic films, has generated much interest and attention for its idiosyncratic style, Martin Scorsese's *New York, New York*, a grossly underrated film, has mostly been ignored. One of the reasons for selecting this film for analysis was that its stylistic and thematic peculiarities may be best recuperated into the canons of critical acclaim if they are related to the Melodrama, especially in its Sirkian form.

Although the narratives of *Written on the Wind* and *New York, New York* would appear to be concerned with substantially different themes, close analysis reveals that there are some very interesting and important similarities. To begin with, both films exhibit what can only be called a schizophrenic attitude towards their protagonists in that they demonstrate a marked reluctance to make crystal clear the very identity of their central figures. A surface reading of Sirk's film would most likely place the Rock Hudson character, Mitch Wayne, as its hero; a similar reading of Scorsese's film would no doubt make the Liza Minelli character, Francine Evans, the protagonist. What is obvious, of course, is that both of them are 'normal,' in that they seem to be well-adjusted and stable, mentally and emotionally. Robert Stack's Kyle Hadley, and Robert De Niro's Jimmy Doyle, on the other hand, are the 'others,' the 'not-normals,' who effect and affect the narrative flow, producing the crises, conflicts, and tragedies peculiar to each film. Douglas Sirk makes explicit reference to this practice of 'hiding the leading man' in *Sirk on Sirk*, his justification being that "in a melodrama, it's an advantage to have one immovable character against which you can put more split ones . . . because your audience needs—or likes—to have a character in the movie they can identify themselves with, naturally, the steadfast one, not to be moved. Now this character ought to be the hero of the story . . ."⁵

However, it is quite apparent that *neither* Sirk *nor* Scorsese is actually interested in this 'steadfast' character (Mitch Wayne and Francine Evans) whose path through life is unencumbered by psychological or social problems—other than their (neurotic) association with the 'split character,' of course. What is foregrounded instead in both films is the anguish and desires of the hysterically handicapped figure—the 'hidden protagonist.' There is a kind of subversive intent to this mask-

ing, this mere pretense of favoring the 'normal' one over the 'other.' While the audience is pacified by being given a positive figure with whom they may identify (Mitch and Francine), it is clear that the directors focus their attention on the negative characters, Kyle and Jimmy. This 'split sympathy' between audience and director creates a certain tension in the film's structure which often perplexes the audience as it permits or rather encourages a double reading. On a superficial level, the film may be seen as favoring the normal character, its thematic message reinforcing the dominant ideology. On a deeper level, however, the film may be read as placing the 'not-normal' as protagonist, its thematic message effecting thereby a critique of that same ideology.

Protagonist as Hysteric

To continue the search for similarities in the narratives of *Written on the Wind* and *New York, New York*, let us look more closely at their protagonists as 'split characters.' If we analyse the specific nature of the splitting, we may observe that, although individual circumstances differ, for Kyle and Jimmy, the cause and effects of the splitting are uncannily alike. In both cases, we refer back to our previous material on male hysteria in order to uncover the source of the problem. Reduced to its simplest statement, the determining factor for 'subject construction' of the two protagonists must be their overwhelming castration anxiety caused by each one's inability to take the place of the father. Both filmic narratives are articulated by the protagonist's struggle against feelings of impotence, and punctuated by their behavioral excesses.

Kyle Hadley: Oedipal Problem

Written on the Wind is strongly marked by the ubiquitous authority and power of Kyle's father, a self-made oil millionaire. In the film, the Name-of-the-Father literally imposes itself everywhere—on cars, buildings, airplanes, towns—in the form of encircled H's proclaiming paternal ownership. In the midst of this claustrophobic patriarchy, the son, Kyle, is grievously out-of-place, alienated by his lack of ability to take on the father's responsibilities/role. "He's a big man," Kyle says of his father, "So big he knows I can't fill his shoes." Until Lucy appears, no one actually gives him a chance at filling them. His father, sister, and (supposed best) friend all treat him as an incompetent fool. Only Lucy/Lauren Bacall recognises the hurt and pain under the brash exterior, and gives him the support and encouragement his own family withholds from him. His meeting with her is crucial, as she replaces the lost mother. With her, he can play the father—he stops drinking and playing around with other women. He no longer needs to rely on guns under the pillow as substitutes for the absent phallus. When he has Lucy, he has the phallus. If the familial relationship is thwarted, if he can't reproduce like the/a father, he *loses* the phallus and thereby loses Lucy. His attempts to buy 'courage' i.e. phallic strength, at the bar point out his frantic search to replace his loss.

Hysteric Manifestations

In *Written on the Wind*, Kyle Hadley is characterised by an overwhelming sense of suffocation. He is continually trying to escape, driving as fast as he can, in an attempt to render himself oblivious to his state of castration. His restless energy is undirected, aimless, and in the end, destructive. Kyle's peculiar manner of speaking in a low measured voice telescopes on itself as the film progresses until he is reduced to spurring out monosyllables as if he were being strangled,



Francine Evans (Liza Minelli) saves the audition for Jimmy Doyle (Robert De Niro) by adding her own touch to his sax solo.

which in fact he is, figuratively speaking, by the circumstances. This strained, hysterical mode of speech is especially evident in the scene with Lucy, after his father has died, where he blames himself and MaryLee for the death. It ends with him covering himself up in the bed, the blankets pulled over his head as if he were a helpless baby, the very opposite of what his father's death should have made him—the head of the family. With Kyle, there is the omnipresent sense that violence is lying just below the surface, ready to erupt at any moment. The film begins with such a moment, when Kyle, after a wild drive through the town of Hadley, gets out of his car and smashes a whiskey bottle against the side of the house. This sound of glass smashing is echoed minutes later by the sound of a gun exploding. Later in the film (but earlier in narrative time), he doesn't hesitate to jump into a confrontation with one of MaryLee's boyfriends who is bigger and stronger than he is, thus setting himself up for defeat and humiliation, doubled by Mitch's ensuing easy victory over the fellow. Kyle's behavior is marked by a kind of hysterical excess on a number of occasions. Wishing to impress Lucy on their first meeting, he offers to buy her an entire advertising company. When that line fails, he manoeuvres her into his private airplane and flies her down to Miami Beach where he has arranged for a hotel suite to be completely fitted out for her, with clothes, handbags, perfumes, and lots of roses. Excessive behavior in the form of a paranoid reaction towards Mitch plays a major part in Kyle's tragedy, as it triggers the actual confrontation between the two which ends in Kyle's accidental death. Thinking that his impotence is not just psychological, Kyle refuses to believe that he could father a child. It is natural to him that Mitch, virile, competent, efficient Mitch, must have done it. Although there is not the space to probe more deeply into the characters in the film, Mitch's role must be noted as it is pivotal to the narrative, since he is the foil against which Kyle is constantly being measured. Mitch is calm and brave; Kyle is hysterical and a braggart. Mitch possesses all the virtues and strengths that Kyle lacks, everything in fact, even his patrimonial right. Kyle himself knows that only Mitch could take the place of his father. It is Mitch, Kyle's best friend, who serves as his chief castrator in the film, pointing out his lacks, rendering him totally helpless and impotent in his father's and sister's eyes and, by the end of the film, in Lucy's, as well.

Jimmy Doyle: Oedipal Problem

While Kyle Hadley is clearly located at the bottom of a patriarchal hierarchy, Jimmy Doyle's position in the diegetic society of *New York, New York* is not as obvious, because the external family structure, omnipresent in *Written on the Wind*, is conspicuously absent from Scorsese's film. Jimmy's problem is not with taking the place of his real father, as was Kyle's, but with his aspirations to become the best, to take the place of the 'ideal' father.⁶ The Oedipal drama of son supplanting father is couched here in the guise of the artist's struggle to gain absolute recognition (Fame) for his uniqueness. Jimmy's attempts to achieve this fame supersede everything else in his life. To Francine's accusation, "It's always you, isn't it," he responds, "Damn right!" Music, his means to success, and money, financial recognition of his primacy, are the most important things to him. *New York, New York* is articulated by the ways in which these two elude him through almost the entire length of the film. Love/sex, the third item in his list of requirements for a 'major chord,' is the only one that he is easily able to obtain, but his relationship with Francine is actually presented in and by the film as a frustrator to his happiness rather than as a source of it. Only after they split up

is he in any way able to come into his own. If we look at those instances where Francine 'saves' him, and read them from *his* point-of-view, it becomes apparent that what she can be seen to be doing in each case is supplanting his authority/artistic presence. At his audition in Brooklyn at the Palm club, just after they've met, Jimmy fails to hold the owner's interest and win the job until Francine steps in with an up-dated version of a popular Maurice Chevalier song. Jimmy as 'back-up' to Francine's more accessible music succeeds where Jimmy as sole performer of less accessible jazz has failed. A similar intervention/co-option occurs later on at another audition, after Jimmy has taken over Frankie Harte's band. The room's owner is unwilling to take a chance on Jimmy's leadership until Francine steps up to the microphone and wins him over with her singing. On the one hand, he gets the jobs and keeps the band together, but on the other, he loses his uniqueness, his originality. His impotence at carving out his own success, in his own way, while with Francine, is doubled by his impotence at taking care of her, of being the most important man in her life. Francine has two 'good' fathers, Tony Harwell, her agent, and Artie Kirks, the Decca Records producer, who provide her with everything Jimmy can't. Not only do they replace him as a 'husband,' but even as a father as well. When they are discussing Francine's contract, Artie assures Francine that he will treat the new baby as if it were his own.

In the same way that Mitch serves as a foil for Kyle in *Written on the Wind*, Paul Wilson/Barry Primus foregrounds Jimmy's social excesses and career failures. Like Mitch, Paul is bland, neutral, and calm. He has a relationship with Francine that is the opposite of Jimmy's; he's supporting and self-effacing while Jimmy is self-serving and destructive. Paul, in other words, is the 'normal' to Jimmy's 'other.' He plays music that is acceptable to the masses, and can make a success of leading the band, even with Bernice as 'girl' singer, where Jimmy only had failure. It is Paul who stays with Francine through her successes, finally leading the band that accompanies her performance at the Starlite Room at the end of the film. And again, like Mitch, he brings out paranoid fantasies in Jimmy which result in Jimmy's resorting to physical violence, and the ensuing public humiliation. Another similarity between *Written on the Wind* and *New York, New York* is the importance within the narrative of the fact of 'having a baby.' Given that the two protagonists are for all intents and purposes emasculated, it is no wonder that the prospect of being a father should take such precedence in the respective plots. One of the major differences between the two films is that Jimmy is ambivalent if not hostile to the idea of paternity—he doesn't want to lose his privileged position as 'unique individual,' as 'other,' preferring instead to remain exclusive (and excluded). Kyle, as we have seen, desperately wants to be 'normal,' just like everyone else. All of Jimmy's energy has to be focused on his music, for it is through that path, and that path alone, that he seeks salvation, i.e. manhood. The paradox of the film's ending is that he has won (fame), yet he has lost (the possibility of a normal relationship).

Hysteric Manifestations

If, as Freud states, excessive behavior is one of the characteristics of hysteria, then Jimmy Doyle is nothing if not an hysteric. From the first time that we see him, singled out from a neutrally-dressed crowd by his eccentric attire—a loud Hawaiian-style shirt (albeit with New York imagery and text), white pants, two-tone shoes—we know that he is supposed to be different from the others. His constant gum-chewing and (pathetic) attempts to pick up women in the opening sequence

of the film belie a nervousness and restlessness that express a barely repressed hostility. In fact, this entire sequence really plays at two levels: one, as a sophisticated screwball comedic episode worthy of, say, Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn, with the roles reversed from male 'constant' and female hysteric to male hysteric and female 'constant'; but on another level, it is horrific in the psychopathy displayed by its 'hero' (a Scorsese trademark⁷). The result for the viewer is the constant blocking of the wish/need to identify with this brash, good-looking young man—a kind of filmic 'fort-da'ing of the viewer's sympathies. There are innumerable instances of situations which cause acute embarrassment for the viewer (again, another Scorsese trademark), all in sequences which play at both levels, comedic *and* psychopathic. Most of them, needless to say, end in violence of one sort or another. They may be characterised by Jimmy's erratic behavior (pretending he's a war victim from Anzio at his hotel, insisting on marrying Francine without having formally asked her, disappearing for hours while supposedly parking his car at the Up Club) and hysterical excess (telling the taxi driver to back up over his prostrate body, filling a car full of flowers in order to apologize to Francine after a fight, clapping loudly to draw attention to himself at the Meadows). Scattered throughout the film are outbursts of hostility not only directed at others, but turned on himself as well. For example, when he takes Francine to a Justice of the Peace in order to marry her, he knocks so hard on the door that he smashes the glass, cutting his hand. He hurts his hand again later on, when helping the pregnant

Francine into their car in the 'flower' sequence. One of the most revealing instances of his internal conflict between 'love' and 'music' occurs after Francine has asked him to spend more time with her at night instead of going uptown to play with his friends. He reacts to this request by grabbing his saxophone and saying to her, "You want me to take this and smash it against the wall? Because that's what you're asking me to do." It is obvious at this point, that his saxophone/music is equated with his phallus, and that he sees Francine as potential if not actual castrator. The choice he will make will be for his saxophone, his source of phallic strength.

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UP UNTIL NOW, we have been concerned with Hysteria as it is manifested in the actions, behavior and personality of the male protagonists of *Written on the Wind* and *New York, New York*. Let us now turn to the second interest of this paper, Hysteria as it is manifested in the filmic texts themselves.

In "Minelli and Melodrama," Geoffrey Nowell-Smith presents a justification for the often criticized excesses of the Melodramatic form. By relating the filmic 'body' to the human body, he draws an analogy between the aetiology of the hysterical person and what he calls the 'hysterical text'.

The undischarged emotion which cannot be accommodated within the action, subordinated as it is to the demands of family/lineage/inheritance, is traditionally

Jimmy Doyle warns Francine Evans never to usurp his authority again.





Jimmy Doyle (De Niro) and Paul Wilson (Barry Primus) get into a violent argument in the "Up Club" scene.

expressed in the music . . . and in certain elements of the mise-en-scène. The mechanism here is strikingly similar to that of the psychopathology of hysteria. In hysteria, and especially in what Freud has designated as 'conversion hysteria', the energy attached to an idea that has been repressed returns converted into a bodily symptom.⁸

Both of the films under consideration may be characterised by just this 'symptom' of excess in their mise-en-scène. What we shall try to demonstrate, however, is that the function of the excessive stylisation differs, that difference being attributable to both context and directorial intent.

It is a given, in film analysis, that Melodrama as a genre is focused on the everyday life of ordinary people; in other words, on what is commonly construed as reality. The narrative pretext of the Melodrama is to present circumstances and situations which are not far removed from the daily concerns of the average movie-goer. That is why such themes as the family, female (and male) struggle for independence, the search for happiness through career, love, etc., are central to the genre. Because the content of the Melodrama stresses reality, a *mise-en-scène* which is heavily stylised inevitably produces a contradiction to that realism. Using the Brechtian notion of distancing, Paul Willemsen has suggested that what this narrative/*mise-en-scène* split offers is in fact a critique of the society which constructs its reality as necessitating those choices that determine the narrative patterns of conventional Melodrama.⁹

Written on the Wind

As a narrative, *Written on the Wind* falls entirely within these conventions, yet its excessive visual style foregrounds the artifice of the diegesis, producing a dramatic tension that makes the film an object of acute interest. Sirk's stylisations in this film serve to heighten the narrative, to exaggerate and freeze the images in such a way as to expose them for what they are—artificial creations. Everything seems to take on a symbolic meaning. For example, dress indicates character, especially with MaryLee, whose internal transformations may be read externally in her particular choice of clothing, from blue jeans and checkered shirt (innocent young girl) through tight lowcut dresses in bright red and yellow (nymphomaniac), to tailored business suit (recuperated through desexualization). Kyle and MaryLee's restlessness and dissatisfaction with their empty way of life is signified by their fast-driving sports cars (again in bright red and yellow), ubiquitous alcohol consumption, and implied sexual looseness. Alienation is a visually marked-out theme in the film. Sirk continually frames his characters, claustrophobically containing them within narrow boundaries. They are often either looking out windows (with the usual binary connotations of inside/outside), or being fixed by/reflected in mirrors, thus twice removed from (the viewer's) reality, like Plato's conception of art in *The Republic*. The dominant cliché-image, to use Willemsen's term, of *Written on the Wind* is the oil well: in its *actual* form—in the fields

pumping up oil; in its *artificial* form—as a scale model and painted representation in Mr. Hadley's office/study; and in its *Freudian* i.e. psychoanalytic form—as Phallus. One of the more memorable ironies of this film is that it is MaryLee who ends up with the oil well in *all* its manifestations!¹⁰

The closure of *Written on the Wind*—Kyle's death, Lucy and Mitch's coupling, and MaryLee's abandonment on a superficial level conforms to the requirements set out by bourgeois conventions, the death/abandonment of the transgressors, marriage and ever-lasting happiness for the 'good' couple. However, as Sirk himself put it, "(A happy ending) makes the crowd happy. To the few, it makes the aporia more transparent."¹¹ As with so many of the more interesting Melodramas (*Duel in the Sun*, *Rebecca*, *Ruby Gentry*, etc.) the 'bad' couple is so much more interesting and sympathetic than its opposite, here Lucy and Mitch, that the ending appears forced; its 'artifice,' the tidying-up of the moral issues in order to reward the good and punish the bad is foregrounded as an ideological practice.

New York, New York

Unlike *Written on the Wind*, *New York, New York* does not have a conventional melodramatic content. What sets this film firmly within its time period, the mid-'70s, is the freedom that its director had in regards to flaunting the conventions of classical Hollywood film. Untied to a studio system, imposed script, or even need to please/appease the public, Scorsese put together a film whose narrative strips away ideological pretense to function as an obvious critique of society's values. To that end, the excesses of its *mise-en-scène* may be said to work *with* the narrative rather than *against* it, as was the case with the earlier film. The fact of the film's failure may be ascribed to just this (publically unacceptable) production against-the-grain. Scorsese's use of artifice is self-reflexive, i.e. the film refers back to itself *as* film, as an artificial creation, especially with regards to filmic conventions associated with musicals and romantic Melodramas. In many instances, what is occurring or has just occurred in the narrative is commented on by the (artificial) *mise-en-scène*, countering the constructed reality with obvious Hollywood illusionism. The result is a kind of jolt to the audience's accustomed passive reception of the film. For example, the opening sequence involving crowds of people celebrating VJ day is converted into a means for introducing the film's hero to the viewer by the device/conceit of having an enormous red neon arrow move in from the right and point directly to De Niro, thus singling him out from the others. Jimmy's rejection by all the women he loutishly and clumsily tries to pick up at the victory celebration is countered filmically by a 'vision' he has at the subway stop of a sailor and girl in white (Liza Minelli in a blonde wig), dancing. In *silence*, they move gracefully and romantically together, recalling such classic Hollywood musicals as *Anchors Aweigh* (1945) and *On the Town* (1949). Another beautifully conceived example occurs when Jimmy is at a train station somewhere in the South, looking for Francine, and his (cardboard cutout) train starts to pull out without him. The camera holds on the image of Jimmy leaning against the train, futilely trying to stop it, being silently moved by its force across the empty platform. It is interesting to note that these sequences, as well as most of the other out-of-doors ones—the *tête à tête* at the Meadows, the wedding at the Justice of the Peace's, Jimmy's farewell to Paul Wilson at a motel, are shot in what is obviously a closed stage. Their use of painted backdrops and constructed sets is not concealed; rather it would appear to be foregrounded. What seems to be happening here is that a parallel is being

made between the first half (courtship, marriage) and second half (rise to success) of the film through the stress on artifice, for the *emptiness* of the conventional romantic imagery which inflects the former is thereby associated with the *emptiness* of performance and stardom which informs the latter.

Emptiness in the form of alienation is visually emphasized by the use of mirrors, as in *Written on the Wind*, to twice-remove from reality, and more particularly, by spotlights. A performer's spotlight conventionally presents him/her to the audience; in *New York, New York*, spotlights tend to isolate, to separate the performer from the audience. One outstanding example of this is when Jimmy stands alone, beside a street-lamp, playing his saxophone, his image captured and held by a single spotlight—more than just the lamplight—while the street/stage gradually darkens around him. Another 'tour de force' on the director's part of signifying with a spotlight occurs during the second half of the film, when Francine is in a studio recording "As the World Goes Round." While the sequence has been criticized for its excessive length which is popularly seen as *stopping* the narrative, what in fact happens is that the *mise-en-scène* **replaces** the narrative. Francine begins the song tenuously, a fragile, susceptible being. As she sings, the studio grows darker, leaving her 'caught' in a spotlight. The camera, at first in long shot, gradually moves in for a close-up of just her face, which is held for some time. While this is taking place, Francine seems to be gaining strength by her performance, her voice gets louder, her manner, more assured. The camera then pulls back to reveal a 'new' Francine, preparing us for her ensuing success and rise to stardom. The two themes, romantic love and performance, come together here with the former being superseded by the latter. Another extended sequence which was so heavily criticized for being excessive that most of it was removed from the released version of the film, is "Happy Endings." Like the previous 'recording studio' sequence, it, too, serves an important function for the narrative of the film. Its structural placement, right before the actual ending which is to the contrary, *unhappy*, foregrounds the very fabric of artifice out of which Hollywood conventionally constructs its plots. The problem-free 'unknown-to-star' trajectory of the "Happy Endings" protagonist contrasts strongly with the problem-laden 'unknown-to-star' trajectories of the two central characters of *New York, New York*. As Jimmy makes clear when he mistitles Francine's film 'Sappy Endings,' Hollywood's version of success bears little resemblance to reality. Scorsese, unencumbered by a '50s morality with its insistence on a happy ending, closes the film with the permanent rupture between Francine and Jimmy firmly acknowledged by both of them.¹²

CONCLUSION

IT IS APPARENT that much work remains to be done on the nature of Hysteria as it applies to melodramatic content (hysterical male) and melodramatic form (hysterical text). However, we hope that this paper has provided some insights into the usefulness of applying a psychoanalytical model to film criticism, for it has permitted us to bring together two very different directors (Sirk and Scorsese), contexts (the '50s, the '70s), and genres (rich family Melodrama, anti-romantic musical-melodrama), in order to point out common concerns which might explain the difficulties inherent in the appreciation of both films. □

FOOTNOTES

1. c.f. Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema' Inspired by 'Duel in the Sun' (King Vidor 1946)," *Framework* (Summer

1981), pp. 12-15.

Griselda Pollock, "Dossier on Melodrama," *Screen* vol. 18 no. 2 Summer 1977, pp. 105-113.

Shiela Whittaker, "It Always Rains on Sunday," *Framework* Issue 9, p. 21-26.

Tania Modleski, "Rebecca as Female Oedipal Drama," *Wide Angle* vol. 5 no. 2, pp. 34-41.

2. Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, Preface to the First Edition in 'Studies on Hysteria,' S.E. vol. II (1893-95), p. xxix.
3. Josef Breuer, "Case Histories" from "Studies in Hysteria," p. 22.
4. Sigmund Freud, "Hysteria," S.E. vol. I (1888), p. 49.
5. Douglas Sirk, as cited in Jon Halliday's *Sirk on Sirk* (1972), p. 98.
6. In *Written on the Wind*, the 'real' father and the 'ideal' father are conflated in one person, Mr. Hadley.
7. Most of Scorsese's male protagonists exhibit similar character traits. Interestingly enough, it's all the ones played by Robert De Niro who conform to this description—Johnny-Boy (*Mean Streets*), Travis Bickle (*Taxi Driver*), Jake La Motta (*Raging Bull*), Rupert Pupkin (*The King of Comedy*). Lying just beneath the attractive exterior is a psychopath. What varies in each film is the amount of disaffection Scorsese is willing to risk in terms of audience reaction/identification.
8. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Minelli and Melodrama," *Screen* vol. 18 no. 2, p. 117.
9. Paul Willeman, "Distanciation and Douglas Sirk," *Screen* vol. 12 no. 2, p. 65.
10. There are quite a few parallels between MaryLee Hadley and Ruby Gentry. Both lose their 'male love object' through their own manipulations; in fact, both shoot and kill their own brother as well. However, both get the family money (through marriage, in Ruby's case) and a career in the end (MaryLee takes over the oil wells, Ruby becomes skipper of her fishing boat), albeit both are 'masculinized' in the process. In addition, there is the distinct possibility of a double reading of the ending in both films, for, from a feminist point-of-view, they can be read as a kind of victory, with the woman becoming independent of male power.
11. Douglas Sirk as cited in *Sirk on Sirk*, p. 132.
12. In reference to the ending of *New York, New York*, Scorsese stated in an interview in *Positif* no. 213: "I filmed a sequence where Bobby and Liza walk down the street chatting like old friends. It didn't satisfy me, for I knew that the public would have the impression of a 'happy ending' . . . When I was editing, I had the idea of a failed rendez-vous, of a rendez-vous where each decides at the same time not to give in, not to surrender. Everyone tried to dissuade me, but I insisted, and finally got the go-ahead."

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Catherine O'Hara: the eccentric, aggressive female character.

Scorsese: AFTER HOURS

by Bryan Bruce

I want to talk about *After Hours* (Martin Scorsese, 1986) in relation to two different, if inseparable, issues: its relationship to Scorsese's previous work, particularly the five Hollywood films he has directed which feature Robert DeNiro¹ (*Mean Streets*, 1973, *Taxi Driver*, 1976, *New York, New York*, 1977, *Raging Bull*, 1980, and *King of Comedy*, 1982); and its representation of masculinity, how it relates to Scorsese's previous films, and how, inevitably, it affects the representation of women.

After Hours might be considered lesser Scorsese partly owing to its apparently commercial quality—its slickness, the all-star cast, the less serious, less intense tone of the film, and partly in comparison to the work that has gone before; the comprehensive, complex, and disturbing character analyses of *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*, the reconstruction of a genre in *New York, New York*, the harsh critique of the media in *King of Comedy*—all make *After Hours* seem like a less 'significant' film. However, within its limitations, and as a more commercial, less challenging and ambitious film, it exhibits, remarkably, much of the character, both in camera style and thematic concerns, of the five aforementioned Scorsese films. The most interesting and instructive aspect of the film is that this lack of seriousness, its simplicity, seems to make literal and obvious, to bring to the surface, many of the implicit or disguised tensions which remain subtexts in his previous work. *After Hours*, then, almost becomes a film about Scorsese, or about what 'Scorsesian' might mean; it's Scorsese's joke on his own identity as auteur.

Just as Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* was taken from a *roman à clef* which was consciously written in the Hitchcockian style with the intention of eventually becoming a vehicle for Hitchcock, the script for *After Hours* (by Joseph Minion) seems to have been written expressly for Scorsese (examples of auteurs inevitably being influenced, to some degree, by that which others [critics, screenwriters] have defined them as). The basic *Wizard of Oz* plot is perfect for Scorsese, affording the expression of most of his usual preoccupations. Paul/Griffin Dunne is whisked away from his boring, routine, Uptown existence as a word-processor (the hurricane of *Wizard of Oz* down-graded here to a fast-motion, wind-blown taxi ride) down to the Art/Bohemia Soho zone of the Lower East, the descent adding a Faustian twist to the original story. Paul finds himself embroiled in a Yuppie nightmare: out of his turf, in a different time zone, his last 20 dollars out the window of the cab, he is confronted with people and situations he cannot read, a world in which different rules apply.

Scorsese's films are always about extremes, characters who are driven to extremes by conflicting drives and irreconcilable impulses, reacting extremely to impossible situations, even undergoing severe physical transformation as a manifestation of the conflicts—Travis Bickle's Mohawk and body-

building in *Taxi Driver*, Jake LaMotta's body-building and subsequent bloating in *Raging Bull*, and, less literally, Paul's eventual petrification in *After Hours*. The extreme situation presented often involves the juxtaposition of two radically different worlds whose intersection results in disaster. In *Taxi Driver*, Travis' fantasy world, his romantic vision of being God's lonely man, and his worship of the feminine ideal, is set against the reality of Betsy's vacuity and the corruption of politics. When Travis takes Betsy to the porn film, he cannot understand her disgust; his fantasy does not allow for the reality of her response. Similarly, in *King of Comedy*, Rupert Pupkin takes his feminine ideal, Rita (a bar maid and ex-cheerleader, almost as empty a character as Betsy), to Jerry Langford's country house because he has come to believe his fantasy relationship with Jerry is real. Rupert's side-kick, Masha/Sandra Bernhard, imposes her love fantasy onto the bound and gagged Langford, disavowing the reality of their roles as criminal and victim. In each case, there is a collision between the subjective, private, constructed world of the hero and the real, public world, and between the pleasure and reality principles. *New York, New York* presents a different kind of fantasy—the stylized romanticism of classical Hollywood and the idealism of *Happy Endings*, the film-within-a-film, rendered with all the generic signifiers in tact, set in stark contrast to the very real and brutal disintegration of the marriage of Francine Evans and Jimmy Doyle. Again, two radically different sensibilities clash, provoking extreme emotional reactions from the characters.

Like Dorothy in *Wizard of Oz*, Paul in *After Hours* is the innocent who is confronted with a world that is completely alien to him, that, unlike his predictable and logical existence (his job the ordering of words), is incoherent, contradictory, and uncontrolled (as with Dorothy in *Oz* and Alice in *Wonderland*, the strange new land can be viewed as the seat of his unconscious anxieties). As our main character of identification, Paul is a departure from previous Scorsesian heroes. Travis Bickle, Jake LaMotta, and Rupert Pupkin are passionate, psychotic characters who each become media heroes, but who are ultimately empty, fame merely attesting to their enormous drive and ambition. Paul's life is empty and passionless; we are meant to identify with him as a nobody. This is closer to Charlie/Harvey Keitel in *Mean Streets*, who mostly observes the violence and chaos of Little Italy which surrounds him (including DeNiro as Johnny-Boy, his psychotic cousin), and almost identical to Jerry Langford/Jerry Lewis in *King of Comedy*. Both Paul and Langford are lonely, empty men whose normality is disrupted by neurotic or psychotic characters. Their emptiness is rendered similarly in both films, and with extreme economy: in *King of Comedy*, the high angle shot of Langford walking across his stark, white living room, stopping in front of the television monitors, cut to his POV of Richard Widmark in Sam Fuller's

Pickup on South Street, cut to medium shot of him eating alone at the table; near the beginning of *After Hours*, the medium shot of Paul entering his apartment looking lost, cut to medium shot of him on the couch watching television in the blue light, flipping aimlessly from station to station, cut to him in a restaurant reading *Tropic of Cancer*, his valorization of Henry Miller defining his meagre (and out-dated) attempt to be hip and radical. The minimal images succinctly convey their boredom and isolation. Both characters eventually become completely static at the hands of the eccentrics, Langford wrapped head to foot with masking tape, Paul encased in plaster of Paris.

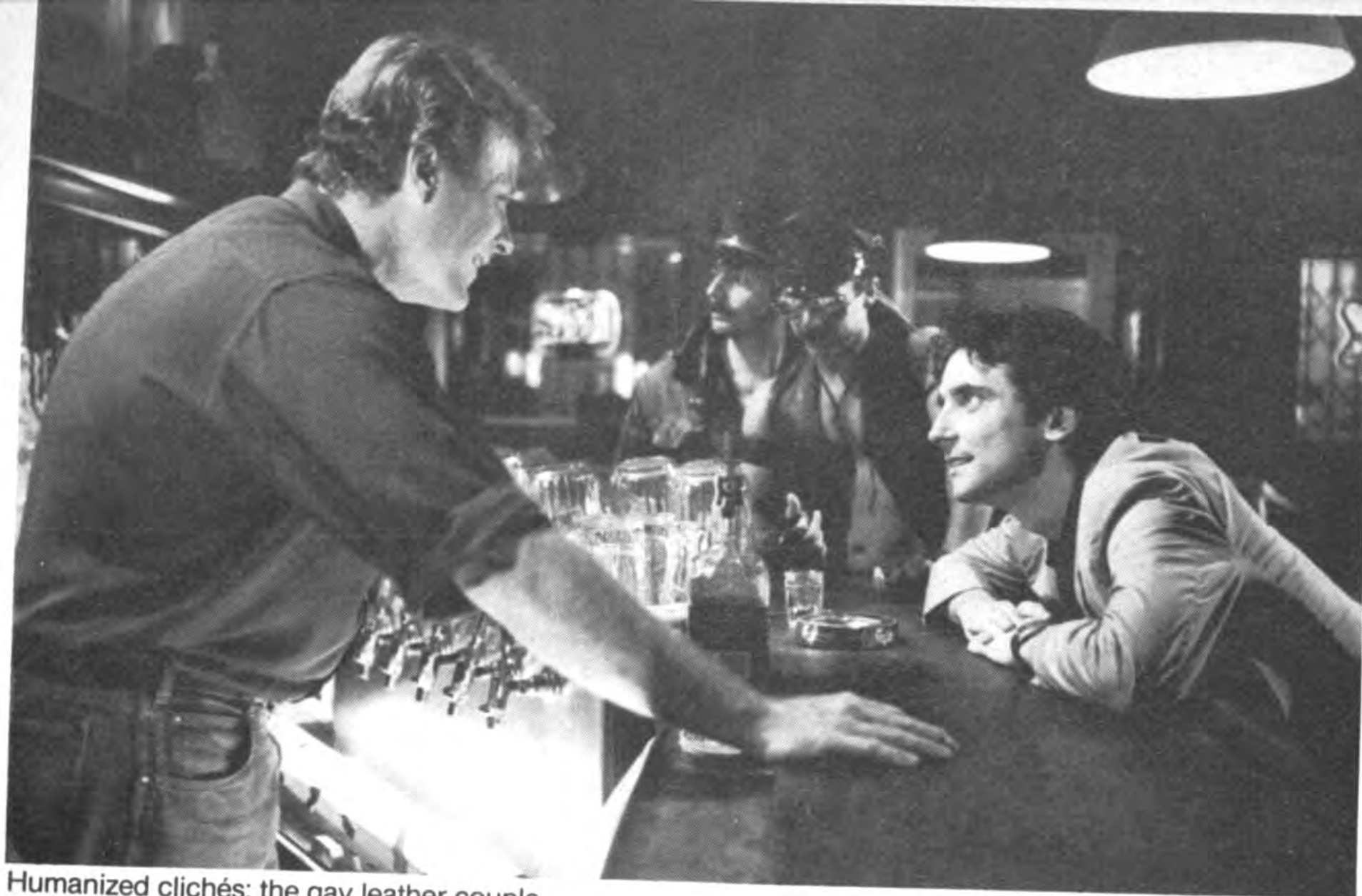
Identification is never straightforward with Scorsese; there is always some split or uneasiness involved in our attachment to the hero. In *Taxi Driver* we are given privileged access to Travis' private world, his diary excerpts read to us in voice-over. The camera is intimate with Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*, his body erotically celebrated in the boxing ring in tight close-up and slow motion. But in both instances, we are identifying with violent characters without substance, heroes with whom we have been encouraged to sympathize, only to be confronted finally by their startling psychosis. *After Hours* gives us the emptiest Scorsese hero yet. Superior, ingenuine, and full of ennui, Paul can do little to generate our sympathy, yet Scorsese relentlessly attaches us to his perceptions: the choker close-up of his mouth at the receiver of the telephone, the camera moving slowly to his ear before circling around him; the detailed POV shots of objects in his office as he ignores the trainee who is telling him of his ambitions (this motif of alienation runs throughout the film, Kiki/Linda Fiorentino, the Soho artist, falling asleep at the climax of Paul's burn victim anecdote); the music accompanied by the ticking of a clock signifying his consciousness of time that runs as a motif whenever he is left alone. Scorsese manages to convey identification and alienation simultaneously, never allowing us to become complacent in our attachments.

Scorsese is equally split in his identification with the heroes. In *King of Comedy*, Rupert is pointedly designated his alter ego by having Scorsese's real mother play the role of Rupert's mother's disembodied voice. Later, in his cameo as the director of the Jerry Langford show, Scorsese finds Rupert's pathetic comic material hilarious, making a mockery of any sympathy it might generate in us. In *After Hours* there is a tension between identification with Paul and distance from him, between experiencing his boredom and confusion and being sympathetic with him, and having contempt for him. Scorsese is equally adept at portraying the middle class, gentry consciousness of the young executive who slums in the Lower East side, and the eccentric, radical art fringe. His cameo as the fascist-looking orchestrator of Mohawk night at Club Berlin, maniacally swinging the spotlight, undercuts his connection to normalcy, just as his disturbing appearance in *Taxi Driver* as the insanely jealous husband in the back of Travis' cab, spying on his wife and her black lover, describing precisely how he's going to murder them, places him squarely on the side of the insane. In each cameo, Scorsese is in a position of delirious control, as if playing out the fantasy of director within the fiction he is creating.

Scorsese's camera style is as innovative and as recognizable as in the previous films, and can be characterized again by the use of extremes, evident in the treatment of both time and scale. The circling track, used obsessively in *After Hours*, gives the impression of a slow revelation (the restless camera often moving just enough to make us conscious of the act of watching): the introduction of Paul; the examination of

Kiki's plaster of Paris sculpture; Paul's discovery of the wanted poster with his face on it, etc. This is set in contrast to the use of the fast zoom (into the digital clock, for example) or the quick collage (of the photos of burn victims), techniques that scarcely allow us to register the material. It is consistent with Scorsese's usual treatment of time: the extremes of its elongation or expansion and its distillation or acceleration. The opening of *King of Comedy* provides a typical example. Jerry Langford moves through the crowd towards the camera in slow motion, cut to Rupert, 180° reverse angle, cut back to Langford at regular speed. Immediately following this, as Langford jumps in and back out of the limousine after being accosted by Masha, time stops completely with the freeze-frame of Masha's hand on the window, the camera behind her in the backseat, with Rupert framed in the background, and everything illuminated by a prolonged camera flash (used similarly in the boxing ring in *Raging Bull*). The credits are contained in this expanded second of time, accompanied by Ray Charles' "Come Rain or Shine," creating, parallel to the image, a jarring audio transition from the clamoring of the crowd to the slow, bluesy torch song. This kind of play with time and the use of rapid transitions has become a trademark of Scorsese. Take, for example, the revelation of Travis' Mohawk in *Taxi Driver*. The camera slowly tracks left approximately waist level, stopping at Travis' midriff, and then, abruptly, cranes up quickly to reveal his extreme transformation. An analogous (and more playful) technique is used in *After Hours* to show the graffiti on the washroom wall that makes Paul nervous. From seeing him close-up in the mirror looking mildly shocked, a quick track to the left reveals the drawing of a shark clamped on to a man's cock. This type of joke works particularly well in *After Hours* as Scorsese is using the same techniques from his 'serious' films to render comic material (Paul's castration nightmare, which culminates in his being pursued by a 'Mr. Softie' truck) which must be read as poking fun at the habitual (mostly sexual) preoccupations and anxieties in his work. Another Scorsese trademark is the use of a formal technique which bears little or no relation to the narrative, serving, rather, as a self-conscious, directorial 'touch.' In *Taxi Driver*, there is a shot of Travis talking at a pay telephone. The camera tracks right to show an empty hallway as we continue to hear Travis' conversation on the sound-track, anticipating his departure down the hallway by at least 30 seconds. The camera movement seems to be motivated by nothing more than the director's will that it should move, making us perhaps uncomfortably aware of his presence. Scorsese plays with time and space analogously in *After Hours* when Paul's first ascent of the stairs to Marcie's studio is interrupted and slightly truncated by two dissolves. The effect of seeing a standard transitional technique used where one would expect, at most, a simple cut, of having such a minute amount of screen time elided at the expense of diverting our attention from the narrative, is that of being shown a formal exercise, a little experiment, or a small joke on the standardization of Hollywood film style. (There are other examples of Scorsese disrupting the narrative with a digression—particularly effective in *After Hours*, the \$20 bill, long since blown out the window, floating to the ground to the accompaniment of the flamenco music Paul is still listening to in the taxi.)

Scorsese's use of shot scale and point of view constitutes a similar stylistic motif of extremes, the choker close-up, either of a character or of his/her POV, off-set by the distanced, objective camera, set above in the omniscient position, looking directly down. In *After Hours*, the extreme close-up seems



Humanized clichés: the gay leather couple.

to take identification a step too far, aligning us with Paul's perceptions so completely that we begin to feel claustrophobic and alienated from him (the constant POVs of clocks and watches, his finger dialing telephones and pressing buzzers, etc.). The over-head camera generally means for Scorsese taking a step back and looking at the character, summarizing the events that have just previously taken place. In *Taxi Driver*, the camera cuts to the highest possible angle, tracking back to retrace the course of Travis' murderous rampage—either a digression for contemplation, or an anticipation of the subsequent media coverage of the event which transforms him into a hero (just as, at the end of *King of Comedy*, the camera slowly zooms in from a high angle behind the audience, over the heads to a close-up of Rupert on stage, signifying the valorization of an empty, psychotic figure by the media). In *After Hours*, the camera finally looks down at Paul from above as he appeals to God for mercy, apologizing for his normalcy ("What do you want from me? What have I done? I'm just a word processor, for God's sake.") Again, the effect is a pause, finding the character at his limit of endurance (he thinks), and affording a final distance for the audience, as if to pass judgement ourselves. This scene is followed by Paul's erratic recounting of the night's misadventures (dissolves, once more, used to condense a relatively short period of time) in front of the confused man who only wants to experience gay sex for the first time.² The quality of summarization is evident in almost all Scorsese's films—the scene from *Taxi Driver* shot from above previously described and the subsequent montage of newspaper clippings about Travis, "Happy Endings," the film-within-a-film in *New York, New York*, as a summary of Francine's life, Rupert's stand-up routine in *King of Comedy*, etc. Again, with Scorsese, split identification with the camera allows us

both to experience the extreme perceptions and reactions of the characters, and to analyse them from a more neutral position.

The final motif of stylistic extremes I want to mention is the interpolation of fantasy into situations designated as real. In *New York, New York*, the shot of a couple dancing an obviously choreographed duet under a street lamp, or, indeed, the artificial sound stages used throughout the film, are pointedly set in opposition to the 'real' situations experienced by the characters. In *King of Comedy*, Scorsese goes a step further, making the juxtaposition less impressionistic, more literal, by intercutting the reality of Rupert in his basement pretending to lunch with Jerry Langford with the fantasy itself; we are given shots of Langford intercut with 180° reverse angle shots of Rupert with shifting backgrounds, either in his basement or in the restaurant. To confuse the issue, at one point Rupert's mother's voice-over is combined with a two-shot of Rupert and Langford in the restaurant. Here, both the audience's and Rupert's perception of reality and fantasy have become completely intertwined. In *After Hours*, a similar effect is created by the two inserts (Paul's POVs) of couples in 'domestic' situations—one of a couple fucking, the other of a woman shooting her husband. These scenes can be read either as realities within the diegesis or as fantasy representations of Paul's paranoia and anxiety. In either case, we have the same feeling of experiencing an alternative time zone with a different set of rules.

After Hours gives the *Wizard of Oz* metaphor a particularly sexual, fetishized twist, and leads us, finally, to the representation of masculinity in the film. Paul Hackett, like Dorothy Gale, spends almost the entirety of the film trying to return home (perhaps the most basic classical Hollywood plot); as he says to Gail/Catherine O'Hara, "I'm unable to get home



ABOVE—The opening sequence of *King of Comedy*. BELOW—Rupert Pupkin: the valorization of an empty, psychotic character by the media.



tonight, you know? I can't get home." Part of the joke of the film is the superimposition of this standard narrative, the drive towards normalcy and complacency, over the perverse, hip and urbane landscape of Soho after dark.³ Marcie/Roseanna Arquette's story about sex with her ex-husband takes the joke farther; whenever he came, she says, he would scream "surrender Dorothy." Aside from associating what has already become somewhat of a gay camp anthem with heterosexual union, it sends up the traditional notion of male dominance in the sexual act, and gives Paul his first clue that the women he is about to encounter are not going to be as easily quantifiable as he is perhaps used to. Not only does Paul not have access to the ruby slippers to take him home, but he also begins to lose his own sexual identity upon contact with a world in which sex is no longer normal and predictable, but rather, inscrutable, perverse, and free of the usual cultural restraints.

The five women who Paul meets are obviously unlike any women he has met before. To begin with, the first four—Marcie, Kiki, Julie, and Gail—are all (progressively) aggressive and make the first move towards him. Marcie initiates the discussion of Henry Miller in the restaurant; Kiki expresses regret that Marcie has returned and is generally sexually aggressive towards Paul, and, later, confuses him even more by revealing her B/D, masochist identity, an active passivity (her initial clue when Paul gives her a massage: "Make it hurt and you're on the right track"); Julie/Teri Garr leaves him the note in Tom's bar ("Help. I hate this job."), and is sitting at his table when he returns (significantly) from his experience of the castration graffiti in the washroom; Gail insists that he return to her apartment so that she can dress the wound she has (significantly) given him with the door of her cab, and, subsequently, leads, in her Mr. Softie truck, the vigilante mob against him ("Do you at all sense the tension here?"). With the fifth woman, June/Verna Bloom, Paul attempts to re-establish a 'normative' relationship, asking her, like a gentleman caller, to slow-dance with him after having played on the jukebox Peggy Lee's "Is That All There Is?" However, June, another plaster of Paris artist, unexpectedly turns out to be the most aggressive of all, literally rendering him totally passive by transforming him into one of her works of art.⁴

The threat to masculinity is conveyed in *After Hours* through the loss of access to the customary signifiers of male power: control, aggression, sexual potency, and money, and the ability to read and decipher situations, to reason, order, and account for. The loss of control is represented by the elements of coincidence in the plot: the chance meeting of characters, of running into the same cabbie whom he stiffed earlier or encountering Marcie's boyfriend Tom/John Heard at the Bar after she has killed herself, places Paul in the unfamiliar position of powerlessness, the circular meandering of the narrative, as against predictable, linear progression, immobilizing him and denying him the ability to act rationally. The initial loss of the \$20 bill, which, coincidentally, reappears on Kiki's sculpture, rendered dysfunctional in the context of art, relieves him of any buying power, even enough to produce sufficient subway fare which has, by chance, increased that very night. When Paul attempts to subvert the rules—those which he usually automatically abides by—and gain illegal access to the subway, he runs head-long into a cop, the intimidating figure of authority preventing him from returning to his familiar, ordered world. (Later, when he tries to call the police to save him from the mob, they assume he is one of the crazies, Paul, like Scorsese, caught between the normal and the insane.)

Paul's inability to read the new laws of time in the underworld further underlines his loss of power. He is constantly appealing to his own ordered experience of time (the golden gates of his office building opening and closing like clockwork at nine and five), always looking at his watch and hearing ticking in his head. Gradually, he realizes that the laws of time have changed; his notion of what constitutes 'late' bears no relation to Marcie's, and when he orders a burger and walks out without paying, it arrives at his table upon his chance return hours later as if no time has passed. In contrast to the disruption of a normal time-frame in his other films, which tends to valorize the hero, albeit in a highly ambiguous manner (the celebration of Jake LaMotta in the ring, the rise to fame of Travis and Rupert), its distortion here is used to undercut Paul, particularly his conventional masculinity, making it seem archaic and obsolete.

However rigorously Scorsese may undercut orthodox masculinity in the De Niro films, identification is almost always exclusively with male figures, and De Niro's appeal as an actor tends to make us more sympathetic to the heroes than their actions should permit. Aside from Francine Evans/Liza Minnelli in *New York, New York*, who is viewed as a successful artist,⁵ the role of women in these films remains limited, reduced to the extremes of the empty, icy beauty (Betsy in *Taxi Driver*, Vickie in *Raging Bull*, Miss Long and Rita in *King of Comedy*), and the anomalous eccentric (Iris in *Taxi Driver*, Masha in *King of Comedy*). In *After Hours*, Paul is not the masculine hero celebrated for his explosive, unstoppable sexual drive (however sublimated), yet we are still restricted to his experience of the female characters, and the five women remain, undeniably, eccentric. As with Jodie Foster and Sandra Bernhard, the performances, particularly Catherine O'Hara's, make them fascinating characters, but the impression remains of a closed masculine view of women as radically other, as the inscrutable or the dangerous; Scorsese has, so far, fully explored the disturbed masculine psyche, but has yet to investigate successfully, or come to terms with, the feminine. □

NOTES

1. De Niro's presence undoubtedly lends the five films a certain homogeneity, particularly since his star persona, despite his physical transformations, is quite consistent. It is significant that each of the five characters he has played for Scorsese are psychotic and associated with violence or criminality of some kind—marginalized characters who try desperately, and unsuccessfully, to be normal.
2. The confused gay man and the concerned gay leather couple in Tom's bar are characters who stand out as clichés which have been unexpectedly 'humanized,' consistent with Scorsese's apparent affinity with marginalized figures.
3. The atmosphere created is actually more East Village than Soho, the latter having become by now almost completely gentrified.
4. The representation of art in Scorsese's work generally makes room for the characters to attempt to make sense of the volatile, destructive situations in which they find themselves. Francine and Jimmy in *New York, New York*, Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*, and Rupert Pupkin in *King of Comedy*—each uses different genres of the performing arts for self-expression, for the release of the repressed emotions and sexual drives that have built up around his/her domestic and/or sexual relationships. In *After Hours*, the depiction of art is much less positive, the plaster of Paris bagel and cream cheese paper-weights and human bodies signifying the petrification and stagnation of the New York art scene.
5. Minnelli's 'cameo' in *King of Comedy* as a cardboard cut-out on Rupert's fantasy talk-show and the film's project of demystifying the star phenomenon qualifies the positiveness of her role.

DESIRE IN SCORSESE'S *AFTER HOURS*

by Steve Reinke

1. Diegetical Contract

At a juncture between structuralist and reader response literary criticism we come across the idea of narrative contracts. The primary contract according to Jonathan Culler in *Structuralist Poetics* is (although he does not name it this) the diegetical contract, "the expectation that the readers will, through their contact with the text, be able to recognize a world which it [the text] produces or to which it refers."¹ In other words we expect a narrative text to generate its own fictional world, or diegesis, and that this diegesis be mimetic, or in some way refer directly to the/a 'real' world. It also states that we expect a text to generate its own set of rules and to abide by these rules, i.e. the internal logic of any genre.

2. Narrative Codes

In Barthes' *S/Z*² we are introduced to five codes which can be said to constitute the narrative text. The diegesis can be thought of as the sum of these codes. Two of these codes, the proairetic and the hermeneutic, are the linear codes which function in tandem to generate narrative. The proairetic is defined retroactively (and is therefore *less* linear than the hermeneutic though still firmly attached to the sequential unfolding of events) and governs the viewer's construction of plot.

3. Hermeneutic Contract

We are drawn through narrative works not by wanting to know "what happens

next" for the sake of wanting to know "what happens next" but by wanting to know "what happens next" for the solving of an enigma a sequence of events almost always entails. This is the hermeneutic contract: that through the telling of the story an enigma or enigmas will be proposed which will be solved by the end of the telling. With every enigma comes the promise of eventual, tantalizing resolution.

4. Hermeneutical Desire

Both Barthes and Culler use the term 'desire' in reference to the hermeneutical code. The reader's desire to have the enigmas slowly revealed and even more slowly solved is one of the most sensual pleasures of the text. The hermeneutical

After Hours: Griffin Dunne and Roseanna Arquette.



contract guarantees that this desire will be (eventually) satiated.

5. Three Narrative Phases

After Hours can be divided into three parts. The first ends at Paul's initial abandonment of Marcie, the second at his discovery of Marcie's suicide, specifically his examination of the corpse. The third takes us from there to the end of the film.

Phase One is dominantly hermeneutical. Our interest as viewers is centred on a specific cluster of enigmas. This cluster begins "Who is Marcie?" quickly develops into "What's wrong with Marcie?" culminating in "Does Marcie have second degree burns on her genitals?". Closely related to these enigmas is the question "Will Paul and Marcie have sex?". Phase One ends with the solution to both enigmas: "Yes, Marcie does have second degree burns on her genitals." Paul flees.

Part two is the shortest, a transitional section. The hermeneutical code clusters, as it will throughout the rest of the film, around the question "How will Paul get home?". This question however is not primarily what propels us through the narrative. The narrative is changing from being dominantly hermeneutical to being dominantly proairetic.

6. Hermeneutical Contract Ruptured

Part two ends with a rupture of the hermeneutical contract. We find that Marcie does not have second degree burns. But we have already seen the scars running down her thigh, we have seen her exit to apply burn ointment after a shower. The enigma we had thought solved returns unsolved; we have been lied to.

At this point something must be done to reconcile the rupture, which is of sufficient magnitude that it threatens to rupture the diegetical contract as well. A rupture in the diegesis, if unchecked, will result in a chaotic and incoherent text.

7. Desire

The seeming satiation of our (hermeneutical) desires is quickly twisted so that it is apparent that satiation is impossible. Desire with no hope of satiation makes the act of desiring itself a nightmare.

8. Diegesis Revised

The diegetical contract revises itself in order that it may remain intact. The fictional world, and the types of occurrences which can conceivably occur in this world, are very different in the first and third sections of the film.

The scars on Marcie's thigh have changed into a tattoo, a skull with a rose

between its teeth. So we have the possibility of saying that the scars were simply a point of view shot, a reflection of Paul's fear of women, fear of his own desires. This would, if it were a completely viable possibility, make the revised diegesis a projection of Paul's inner fears, a fable of castration anxiety. But the scars cannot be explained away so easily. It is not a matter of a single point of view shot. We have also seen the burn ointment, we have seen Marcie take it to the bathroom after a shower, we have seen Paul smell it as she returns. The impossibility of the situation is irreconcilable.

The resulting diegesis is one much less "real." It is in part a nightmarish projection of castration anxiety, but the text stops short of letting us fully attribute the narrative to Paul's psyche. At any rate, it is a diegesis which allows a narrative where the sequence of events is not tied to an objective probability, as it was in the first section.

9. Proairetic Desire

The resulting diegesis cannot allow the hermeneutic code to become dominant—we would not consent to the contract. (This is not to say that the third section is devoid of the hermeneutic code, or hermeneutic contracts, for the code is constantly active. It is just that it is no longer

After Hours: Linda Fiorentino and Griffin Dunne.



the dominant structuring force.) If the text is to remain primarily narrative the proairetic code must take over. And it does—in fact, it becomes if anything overactive. The narrative is now structured (or hyper-structured) on elaborate coincidences, unlikely parallel occurrences. It becomes openly and unabashedly contrived.

Hermeneutical desire, proving not satiable, turns to fear. We are left with proairetic desire, its less sensual twin.

10. Doors as Vaginas, Vaginas as Doors

The proairetic code is the code in which thematic concerns are rendered temporal. One mechanism by which this is accomplished is the use of symbols or motifs as structuring devices. The most interesting (and systematic) of these is the use of door and vagina imagery. Both are, in terms of the text, symbols of simultaneous desire and fear. Paul desires to go through certain doors though consequences will be paid for trespassing. Paul desires to have sex with certain women though consequences, likewise, will be paid for trespassing. Because these consequences become overwhelming enough to transform the initial desire to fear, both doors and vaginas become the symbolic manifestations of castration anxiety. And we needn't be completely Freudian about it either: vaginas can be as much symbols of doors as doors can be of vaginas.

First the doors. There is the door to Kiki's loft where admittance is endangered by the falling bunch of keys. There is the door to Marcie's room which can trap Paul inside with her corpse. There is the door to Club Berlin (Paul's exchange with the doorman is an almost verbatim retelling of a Kafka parable³), and the punishment of a Mohawk haircut for entering without an invitation. (This is the most explicit enactment of castration. Unlike the others it is not directly related to the desire/fear of women.) There are various other doors which function in a similar way. Almost each door is entered twice, once without permission and once with. Often when Paul enters a door with permission it leads to another door which he does not have permission to enter. Club Berlin, the second time, leads to June's basement which leads to the plaster room. "Don't go in there!" she cries, but Paul enters anyway and is covered with plaster which June immediately paper mâchés, completely immobilizing him. Likewise the door to Kiki's loft leads to the door to Marcie's room, the door to Marcie's boyfriend's apartment leads to the bathroom and overflowing toilet, the door to Terminal Bar leads to the

bathroom and the graffiti *vagina dentata* (a shark biting a penis) which prevents urination.

Finally we have the gate leading to the building where Paul works, the huge golden door filling the whole frame which opens and closes the film's door imagery and comes to represent stability and refuge. This is the stability of economic affluence (the doors are huge and golden), the stability of routine (they are opened and closed at the same time each day, in accordance with a chiming tower clock). And it is the refuge of home. If *After Hours* is a *Wizard of Oz*-journey home, the office becomes, symbolically, and perhaps ironically, Paul's home. These are the only doors which he feels he can safely enter; the refuge of the corporate father. (Perhaps these doors could be seen as representing a 'true' castration, a castration already enacted by patriarchal values, or, if one prefers, the boredom and stagnation of a dead-end job. Perhaps it is this genuine castration which gives rise to the specter of the type of castration articulated in the film.)

In most narratives there would be no explicit vaginal imagery—it would be disguised as something else, a door, cave, tunnel, etc. It would be expected that in *After Hours* more explicit imagery we would see the more archetypal imagery of less explicit narratives. The (apparent) scars on Marcie's vagina can be seen as an allusion to a dragon guarding a cave full of treasures and/or to Medusa and her elaborate hair-do of snakes. The scars are a dragon, but they are also Medusa-snakes—a vision of grotesque femininity which, if gazed upon, castrates a man by turning him to stone.

It is Kiki who first alerts Paul to the existence of scars, 'horrible, awful scars' that many women are covered with. Paul counters with a story which, at that point in the narrative, seems unconnected with Kiki's observation. When he was a boy getting his tonsils out (another castration) he was, for lack of space, put in the burn ward, blindfolded, and told that if he removed the blindfold the operation would have to be reperformed. He does not finish the story, but it seems he peeked one night and had to suffer some sort of consequence. (We may take the act of looking at something forbidden, or merely the desire to look, as an act of invasion, of wanting to enter.) We as an audience, know that this being a Hollywood film, we will be deprived of seeing any vaginas. Our desire/fear (which operates, although with varying degrees, regardless of the individual's sexual preferences) is partially answered, as is Paul's, by his thumbing through a 'for-

bidden' book of burn victims. These photographs, shown in a montage so fast we do not actually 'see' anything, function as a metaphorical replacement for Marcie's apparently mutilated vagina, a vagina that castrates, like Medusa's snakes, by sheer grotesqueness.

The next vaginal image is the already mentioned graffiti shark-biting-man's-penis. The next Medusa has, instead of snakes, a ridiculously elaborate and out of date bee-hive hair-do. The bee-hive functions as a metaphorical replacement for her vagina, which is, if not actively threatening, too strange and foreign to desire, though not too foreign to castrate. When she asks if Paul likes her hair, he replies yes (although he really means no). 'Why don't you touch it?' 'I'm afraid of messing it up.' 'You won't.' So Paul sticks his forefinger in, and it gets trapped. As he is yanking it out a mouse is caught in one of the traps which circle the waitresses' canopied bed. The next two women Paul encounters, the Mister Softie driver and June, do not, although they perform symbolic castration, have any sort of metaphorical replacements for their vaginas. One assumes that if they did, Paul would, at this point in the narrative, find them intolerable.

11. Conclusion

We have in the fictional world of *After Hours* the possibility of desire being slowly and systematically extinguished. Satiation, unless it be the 'dry,' relatively unsatisfying satiation offered by Paul's golden office tower, is a diegetical impossibility. We can parallel the impossibility of sexual desire with the impossibility of the film's narrative to continue in a primarily hermeneutical mode. This would parallel the replacement of Paul's sexual desire with the desire to return to a safe home, to the text's replacement of a primarily diegetical mode with the dry, relatively unsatisfying pyrotechnics of the proairetic mode.

The three types of desire (the desire apparent within the text itself, the desire of Paul as a character within that text, and the desire of the audience) are inextricably bound together, mutually dependent and, after a certain point, indistinguishable.

12. Notes

1. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975, p. 192.
2. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Trans. by R. Miller, Hill and Wang, 1974.
3. Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, trans. by W. and E. Muir, 1971, p. 3.

Masculinity in the Movies: To Live and Die in L.A.

by Richard Lippe & Florence Jacobowitz

INTRODUCTION

OUR IMMEDIATE RESPONSE to most popular narrative movies in the '80s is one of rejection and contempt for the reactionary/regressive politics being celebrated. In a number of distinguished films released throughout the '70s, the American hero was dethroned and was critically presented as being fallible. Although lacking a coherent, consistent political project, the films took bold steps to undermine male myth figures and recuperative conventions like the happy ending. Consider, for example, *The French Connection*, '71, *Play it Again Sam*, '72, *The Godfather*, '72, *Night Moves*, '75, *Nashville*, '75, *Dog Day Afternoon*, '75, *Taxi Driver*, '76, *The Deer Hunter*, '77. The '80s has reinstated the potent unflinching American male with a vengeance through heroes like Sylvester Stallone (Rocky/Rambo), Chuck Norris, and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Although occasional exceptions surface in stars like Christopher Walken (who, interestingly, has not sustained his career in the '80s), in the ambiguous image of Clint Eastwood and in a newcomer like Aidan Quinn, current popular stars reinforce traditional masculine imagery in an unprecedented manner. Common attributes of these heroes include physical aggressiveness, instinctive behavior motivation, militaristic discipline, a vigilante sense of justice and law and order. The '80s conception of physical attrac-

tiveness is the over-sized rippling, muscled, sweaty body which serves as the male's weapon and connotes his omnipotence. Combined, these dominant male images essentialize traditional norms of masculinity which are being privileged and reinforced as a gender ideal.

What this "sophisticated" critical response lacks is a consideration of the needs/pleasures these images provide for the mass audience. The phenomenal box-office success of these films testifies to their popular appeal—a political statement in itself. The return of fascist aesthetics¹—the over-emphasis of the physical, god-like masculine presence and the appeal to an emotional instead of an intellectual response to these works—is a frightening indication of the current political climate and the overall move to the extreme right.

Many contemporary films like *An Officer and a Gentleman*, *White Nights*, *Rambo*, *Rocky IV*, are blatantly supportive of aggressive militarism in the name of patriotism. These films indirectly address the tensions and fears of an unstable economic/political social environment by offering easy targets for the viewer on which to vent hostilities and passive rage; they also contain sexual energies within safe, conservative outlets. (The flip side of this trend is the regressive escape to Spielberg's fantasy myths of childhood innocence and wonder, privileging the young boy/male as the explorer and adventurer.) The catharsis is offered through the hero figure



The Terminator: leather, chains, the look, the phallus (Arnold Schwarzenegger).

who has extraordinary, superhuman powers and physical strength, and a kind of animalistic survival instinct. The *Rambo/First Blood* films and the Bronson/Norris/Eastwood vigilante cycle, acknowledge the insufficient action of America's organized police and system of diplomacy to defend and preserve American values. The heroes are consequently "forced" to take justice into their own hands and retrieve their lost buddies in Vietnam (*Missing in Action* and its sequel, *Uncommon Valor*) or to rectify government policies which have become dangerously liberalized. The emphasis is placed on the enterprising (male) individual who can "make" it on his own without the help of government agencies and social policies. What is crucial is the fact that these films do not criticize the American democratic/capitalist system, but instead insist on fortifying and toughening the American image from its less than heroic recent history (Vietnam, Watergate, Jimmy Carter in Iran, etc., etc.). The social impact of the women's and gay movements is part of the 'leniency'/softening that needs rectification—women are relegated to peripheral positions of servitude/background decoration/wombs for the male hero's child (see Taylor Hackford's vision of gender in *An Officer and a Gentleman*, *White Nights*). Masculine heterosexual prowess is established, glorified and never questioned. (The current teenage boy's rites of passage cycle of films, of which *Once Bitten* is a recent contribution, are in varying degrees obsessed with establishing the young man's 'healthy' heterosexuality; this is, in part, established by juxtaposing 'normal' male characters to gay stereotypes who are identified as faggots/queers. The latter set up a negative alternative that must be rejected as grotesque and 'unmanly.') All in all these films naturalize and reinforce the most traditional/oppressive social dictates of patriarchal masculinity. In effect, the trend is to deny the critical questioning of 'norms' which had been raised in the '70s.

The above-mentioned films are aesthetically impoverished in terms of style, utilizing the most rudimentary plot structures in order to emphasize action and simplified character oppositions. There is a shameless soliciting of an emotional/visceral response from the spectator on the most elementary level. The creative input in terms of production/direction/script is minimal; instead, the works rely on a formulaic simplicity which demands little mental effort on the part of the spectator. This form of popular culture is more akin to video games or sports events than it is to a history of motion picture art.

The works of a director like Martin Scorsese (and one might add Michael Cimino and Brian de Palma) are an exception to the majority of films being produced within the Hollywood cinema, both in terms of their aesthetic qualities and thematic complexity. This director's films are concerned with issues of gender/sexuality and are more successful critically than commercially.

For instance, *New York, New York* and *Raging Bull* are very centrally about the construction of masculinity, masculine dominance, and its effects on gender relationships. The films move towards a conclusion which underlines the tensions and impossibility of heterosexual couplings within contemporary patriarchal capitalist society. In addition, both films have 'hero' figures who are severely undermined in the narrative. Viewer identification with these male characters is virtually impossible, whereas the female protagonists are primarily empathetic characters. Unlike the De Niro character, Liza Minnelli and Cathy Moriarty in the respective films are accessible because of their sensitivity and intelligence and are presented as multi-dimensional people. In the course of

both films, the female protagonists reach the point where they can no longer tolerate their husbands' offensive treatment of them and react by abandoning the marriage.

After Hours, Scorsese's most recent film, is a black comedy which also takes as its subject matter the heterosexual male's anxieties and fears about women. The film specifically highlights the male protagonist's (Griffin Dunne) castration fears. But in *After Hours* and in contrast to the Scorsese/De Niro films mentioned above, Dunne is the character with whom the narrative solicits identification most strongly. This is in part due to the character's dilemma which is his inability to return to his familiar non-threatening environment and, by extension, to his identity. Although Dunne initially seems to want to escape his monotonous routine uptown existence, his attempt at liberation catapults him into an increasingly sinister, nightmarish world peopled with a variety of grotesque, aggressive, weird women. All these female characters are better described as caricatures and can be read as projections of Dunne's fears and fantasies. Yet, and it is not without potential significance, Dunne has no control over any of the women he interacts with.

In another Scorsese/De Niro collaboration, *King of Comedy*, there is an interesting split between the film's female protagonists: on the one hand there is Rita/Diahnne Abbott whom De Niro wants to construct as his 'ideal' woman, i.e., high-school sweetheart, future wife. He wants her to be the woman who validates his identity as a successful man—the 'King' of comedy: but, on the other hand, there is Masha/Sandra Bernhard who can be described as being closer to the weird, aggressive women who populate Dunne's nightmare in *After Hours*. However, Bernhard consistently maintains her own identity, regardless of De Niro's attempts to place her in his schemes. Despite the superficial similarities between Bernhard and the women in *After Hours*, the former remains an autonomous character whose existence in the narrative is not dependent upon the male's desires and fantasies. Although, arguably, Bernhard is trapped in her fantasies about possession of the father, the women in *After Hours*, however weird, aren't seeking male approval.

After Hours moves towards its pointedly absurdist ending, where fate redelivers Dunne to safety, which is, ironically, his dull niche at the workplace. Although issues of male hysteria and castration anxieties are raised within the circular trajectory Dunne experiences, the film ultimately avoids producing a rigorous critical perspective on male anxieties and gender relationships. The problem is compounded by the fact that Dunne remains throughout essentially innocent: the film never implicates him in his heterosexual masculinist nightmare. (This is, in part, complicated by the conception of the character as played by Dunne. He is, essentially, a nice middle-class yuppie kind of a guy—a far remove from the complexities of De Niro's male characters in any of the Scorsese/De Niro films.) Because of the way the women are presented in the film, the viewer is given little recourse but to remain trapped within Dunne's perspective. The result is that a severe limitation is imposed on the film's critical potential in regard to its 'hero.' It is particularly disappointing when considering the Scorsese films previously mentioned, which do successfully dramatize masculinist behavior without remaining complicit with it.

We have chosen, instead, to analyze William Friedkin's *To Live and Die in LA* because it foregrounds the tensions inherent in masculine dominance without trying invisibly to naturalize the masculine 'codes' which are part of gender construction. In fact, *To Live and Die in LA* stretches the limits of a realist narrative by its insistence on heightening and over-



Rocky IV: patriotism and masculinity (Sylvester Stallone).

stating its concerns both formally and thematically. The film is extremely stylized and sophisticated in its use of choreographed color, editing and visual composition (also attributable to Robby Muller's breathtaking cinematography). The lack of any recognizable star personas allows for a more intense presentation of masculine codes which aren't complicated by the connotations associated with individual stars. Finally, although we are not claiming that the film is wholly attributable to the director, Friedkin's fascination with images of masculinity and his interest in assaulting/upsetting conventional notions of gender behavior are evident in several of his preceding films, most notably in *The Boys in the Band* '70, *The French Connection* '71, *The Exorcist* '73, *Cruising* '80 and *Deal of the Century* '83. Although easily comparable to *The French Connection* on the level of crime and police authority, the film is for more interesting in relation to *Cruising* where the division between gay/heterosexual male identity is all but destroyed by the close of the film.

We have outlined a number of 'codes'/motifs of masculinity which we find central to both *To Live and Die in LA* and to current presentations of masculinity in the most popular contemporary films. These include 1) the Buddy/Honor code; *Rocky IV* employs a variation of this as a narrative premise to give justification to Rocky's fight with the Russian, as do the various Viet Nam buddy retrieval movies. 2) The Double motif. This narrative structure establishes a juxtaposition between two seemingly 'opposite' characters who are linked, inevitably by common characteristics/desires/identities. By setting up the mirror/double to the white heterosexual male, the films open up a space for a potentially complex critique of the masculine 'norm'/ideal. The following films which are

structured in this way are among the most challenging works of the '80s: de Palma's *Blow Out*, *Body Double* and *Scarface*, Eastwood's *Tightrope* and Cimino's *Year of the Dragon*. In addition, we have outlined codes of adornment and body posturing including the iconography, accoutrements and use of space associated with masculinity, which is crucial to the visual discourse of power/domination. We found the code of rage/violence to be an all-pervasive one which informs the others and serves as a focal point for the articulation of masculinity in the contemporary cinema.

Looking at the output of the '80s in terms of the treatment of gender/sexuality/class, we noticed that the most progressively critical works are nightmare visions of cynicism, black humor, alienation and despair. In one of the scenes in *To Live and Die in LA*, there is a long take on a graffiti mural in East Los Angeles which begins "I used to dream radical dreams . . ." This sentiment seems to sum up the film: in the '80s there are no radical dreams and everyone must learn to live within a system that has undermined and co-opted the energies of radical change.

CODES SPECIFIC TO MASCULINITY:

(a) THE BUDDY/HONOR MOTIF: Male bonding/love/eroticism is legitimized through male 'friendship' in the personal realm and 'partnerships' in the professional realm. Richard Chance/William L. Peterson to John Vukovich/John Pankow: "He was more than my partner . . . he was my friend." Sexual/erotic energies and emotional love are sublimated through the male's mutual commitment and respect for each

others' professional capacities and physical bravado.

The pre-credit sequence of the film establishes Chance's commitment to/love for Jim Hart/Michael Greene. Typically, the energies binding the couple erupt in a physically dangerous situation: A terrorist threatening to blow himself up (as well as the President) is confronted by Chance on the roof of a building. The man is pulled off the edge of the roof and explodes; Hart emerges out of the dark and is visibly shaken. Chance, on the other hand, is under *control* and comforts his partner (touching his shoulder, smoking a cigarette), suggesting "let's get outta here Jimmy, . . . go play cards, get drunk."

The extended sequence is privileged as it appears before the credits and situates the narrative to follow within its concerns. Besides establishing the male couple/partnership (the first of many couples/doubles/partners/adversaries), the sequence also introduces the:

(a) extended male buddy system: One of the opening images is a closeup of the US flag and the Presidential flag, introducing the President, described informally as "THE MAN" who will later join the agents for a game of cards (suggesting he is 'one of the guys'). The male buddy system needs to be placed within the larger context of a social hierarchy which privileges the dominant ruling class. Reagan's taxation speech aligns his platform with the Americans who fought oppression 200 years earlier in the Revolution. The speech mythifies the interests of a privileged, monied class through a validation of its actions by invoking a metaphor of an undivided nation. (This speech introduces the money motif which sets up distinctions between healthy capital and 'bad' counterfeit money, both in circulation.) The secret service form a parade of limousines which both serves to protect the President and visually establishes his power/status and separation from the rest of America.

(b) the codes of rage/violence which includes the 'death' motif: The terrorist's self-destruction is prefaced by his proclamation "I'm ready to die"—the first of many subsequent masculine death drives played out by all the major male characters. The sequence ends with a fade to black and a gunshot, setting up the final motif of the gun as both an extension of the phallus and the signifier of violence/militarism/law and order and its links to the death drive, as it emblemizes the power to kill or protect.

The rituals of male bonding and the death drive motifs continue in two important scenes which follow each other. The first of these is the scene where Chance performs a spectacular ritualised display of masculine prowess—his dive off the bridge serves to test his courage, his rugged individuality, his endless need to confront his mortality. As Chance dives off we hear a scream followed by laughter: it is only later that we see a line attached to Chance as he skims the surface of the ocean. The scream connotes fear followed by the laughter of defying that fear. Chance later describes the sensation as having your balls "go up to your throat." The ritual is also linked to the money motif as the agents bet on his daring/guts. Hart also aligns Chance's skill at diving to his skill in spotting bad money and toasts him, claiming there's "nobody I'd rather have backing me up." The sexual allusion is followed up immediately in the next scene where Chance and Hart exit from the bar alone. After Hart playfully calls Chance "*Such a fucking hot dog*," Chance presents Hart with a retirement gift: a steel encased fishing rod. "That's a beauty"/"Let me use it?"/"If you come and see me"/"I'm gonna miss you" (followed by both men punching each others' arms, etc.). The sexuality and eroticism between the men surfaces in the dialogue and in the imagery which is notice-

ably excessive. Both men behave in a casual, slightly embarrassed manner and seem eager to downplay the emotional intensity of the exchange; the displaced intimacy is also signalled in the names they use which, like an endearment, restate their bond: "amigo," "partner."

Hart's retirement ends the partnership i.e., the legitimization of their bonding/love and signals the death of their relationship and the threatening implications of powerlessness, vulnerability and mortality. Ironically, Hart's masculine insistence on facing the Masters assignment alone in his remaining two days at the job is also an additional expression of a death drive. Hart's death finalizes a separation which was already imminent; Chance's rage for vengeance coupled with his guilt for not having been there to "back him up" is rooted in his repressed anger over losing Hart and having no acceptable outlet for expressing his loss and frustration. It is significant that the scenes with Hart in the bar following the dive and later outside mark the only time in the film that Chance is fully at ease and gives the impression of being genuinely happy and content.

The motif of vengeance over the loss of a dead buddy is a common narrative premise; In *Rocky IV*, Rocky agrees to fight the Russian and communism at large to avenge the death of his black friend/boxer² (i.e., Rocky's not racist). This can be correlated with the contemporary vigilante films already mentioned in the introduction. It is interesting to note that women are never cast in this role. The pseudo-feminist vigilante cycle, which includes *Sudden Impact*, *Lipstick*, *Ms. 45*, *Savage Streets*, *Avenging Angel* sets up a personal vendetta resulting from the protagonist's direct experience of masculine violence. The important distinction to be made in *To Live and Die in LA* (and one might add Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*) is that vengeance/rage is placed within the context of repressed homoerotic tensions and desires.

The emptiness and loss produced by Hart's death is replaced by the new bonding/partnership with Vukovich. For Chance, the new partnership does not offer the same satisfaction and is exploited to different ends as is made evident throughout the remainder of the narrative. It is Vukovich who 'courts' Chance, seeking out his friendship and intimacy. Vukovich comes to Chance's apartment and proposes that he replace Hart. Chance accepts (christening the bond by calling him "amigo") but stresses that all his efforts and desires focus on 'bagging' Rick Masters/William Dafoe at all costs, "And I don't care how I do it." Masters is the actual replacement of Hart in the sense of serving as an alter ego, expressing what is unsayable and unactable (i.e. representing what is desired but goes consciously unacknowledged) under masculine 'norms.' The film establishes this parallel by intercutting scenes of Chance's activities with those of Masters. Chance's dive into the water is mirrored by Masters' ritual burning of his self-portrait. Chance's ability to track counterfeit money is matched with Masters' ability to create it. Finally, it is Masters who kills Hart.

The male partnership implies a code of honor which must be respected at all costs. Chance continually asserts this code to manipulate Vukovich's participation, being indifferent to the latter's needs or feelings. For example, when Chance illegally steals Waxman's book of contacts he tells his amigo/partner that he wouldn't have done it if he wasn't with someone he trusted. This forces Vukovich into a position of declaring his allegiance to Chance and his methods of achieving his ends; Vukovich also states that he would never "snitch" on a partner, and deserves Chance's trust. This incident is taken up more fully further on when Chance proposes



To Live and Die in L.A.: washrooms.

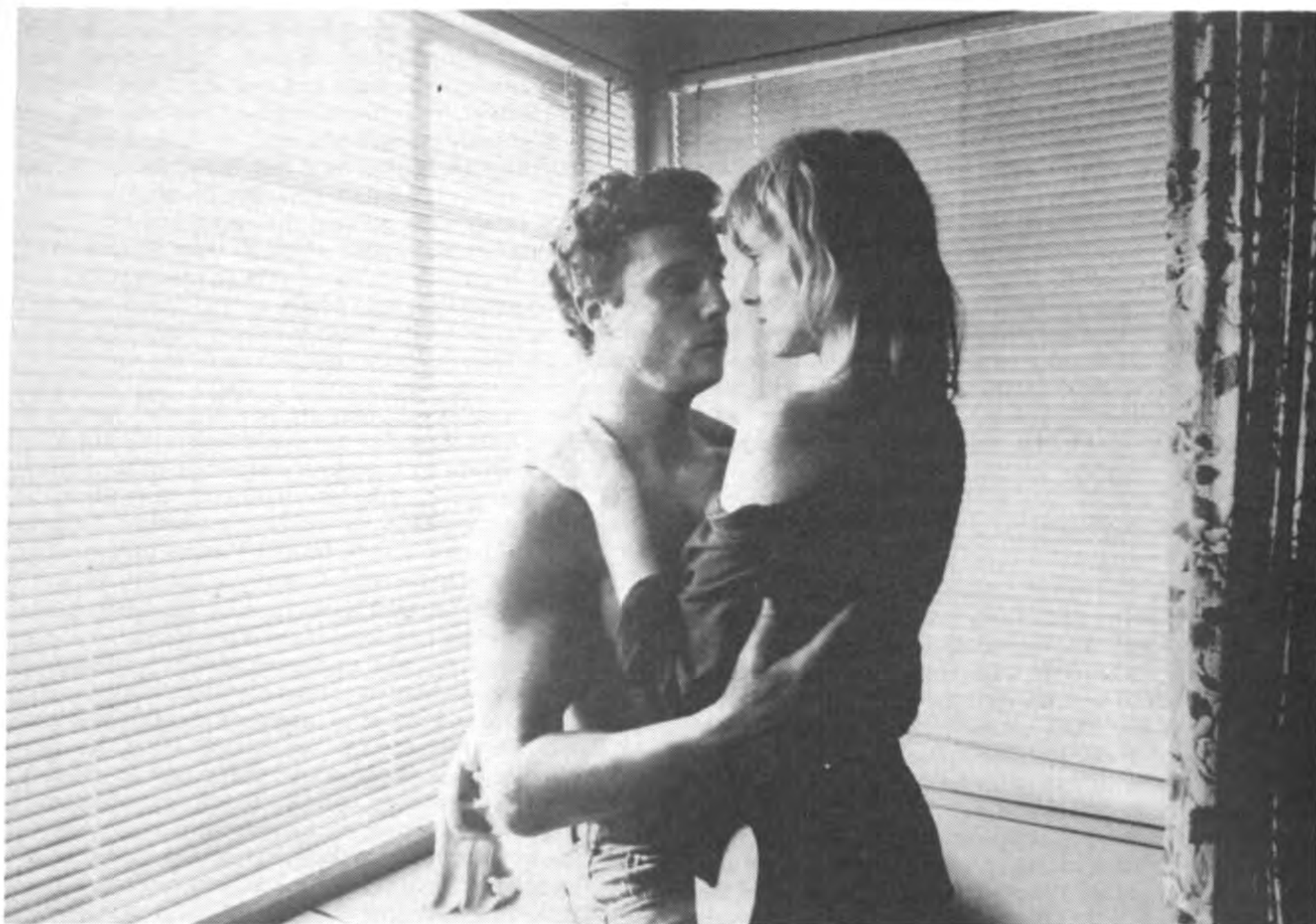
armed robbery and after the FBI agent has been robbed and shot. When Chance's scheme is met with Vukovich's protest, Chance responds, "You're not my partner . . . you're not even my friend"—a line which clearly taunts Vukovich with the intimation that he can't as yet replace Hart in Chance's estimation. When Vukovich seeks Grimes' council he finally admits that he "can't hang up my partner—even if I have to go to the joint." This masculine sentiment is honored in the 'criminal' world as well, as Cody refused to inform on Masters. Masters also honors the code, priding himself on never "fucking" anyone out of a deal, connecting the masculine honor/buddy ethic with its sexual undertones and the way it works in the professional world of 'business.' It is significant that Chance's girlfriend, Ruth Lanier/Darlanne Fluegel, acts as an informer; while she can be fucked, she can't be trusted (the film suggests that she has set up Chance). In other words, she is the antithesis of all that is valued in the male world. Vukovich is 'feminized' in the narrative both visually and in characterization and is, consequently, less attractive in terms of preferred cultural norms. Vukovich's hesitations and hysteria (a typically 'feminine' response) are particularly evident in the car chase sequence. His inability to act after the death of the FBI agent, his unheroic reluctance to take the law into his own hands (Chance taunts him with "you ain't got the nuts . . ." "kiss my ass . . .") and his need to seek out advice underlines his weakness. At the same time Vukovich is the only character who shows any kind of humanity. He alone is traumatized by the death of the agent Thomas Ling. During the car chase sequence, Friedkin parallels Vukovich's concern with Chance's through memory inserts. Vukovich is

thinking about the death of the agent whereas Chance feels the exhilaration of the bridge dive. Vukovich's final transformation into Chance (see the Double motif)—his acquisition of a masculinist personality and posturing—significantly, is not idealized; in fact, in the film's final scenes, he is presented as a monster, having lost the emotional sensitivity that made him human. The film presents a critique of the masculine position which the audience, traditionally, expects to have endorsed. Masters' final words to Vukovich in the infernal warehouse are "why didn't you take the deal Grimes offered? . . . you wouldn't *roll over on your partner*." Masters fully appreciates the generic laws in operation.

The 'nightmare' side of the trust/honor system is the real masculine fear that everyone is out to exploit everyone else. This links the masculine ethos with the larger system of capitalism.

THE DOUBLE MOTIF

THIS MOTIF PERVADES the entire film on various levels. The film's title immediately suggests the life/death dichotomy. The film continuously juxtaposes shots of the shiny privileged areas of Beverly Hills with the grimy, crumbling underside of East LA, visualizing ethnic and class distinctions. Finally, the circulation of counterfeit money threatens to undermine the value of legitimate money. The most pronounced sets of character doubling are Chance/Masters and Chance/Vukovich. As already noted, the narrative parallels Chance with Masters. The allusion is immediately suggested



To Live and Die in L.A.: privileging the male body (William Petersen, Darlaine Fluegel).

by their names Richard and Rick, 'Chance' and 'Masters.' Although both are competent professionals Masters is motivated by his intelligence and creativity. This is a familiar convention in the American cinema reflecting a cultural tendency to mistrust intelligence; it also signals a class mistrust of domination through intelligence, language, the word. In the cinema, it is often aligned with a crafty 'master' criminal who is opposed to the hero who 'naturally' knows right from wrong. *To Live and Die in LA* complicates conventional expectations by systematically collapsing the divisions separating the villain/hero. Both resemble and are attracted to each other and neither character is categorically identifiable as either 'good' or 'evil.' In addition, Masters falls within the specialized masculine category of the creative artist who signifies sexuality. This however, does not compromise his masculinity. Masters remains *powerful*, in control (the master of both capital and human desire) and destructive. He is also aligned with the Romantic artist who is fascinated by excess, indulgence and the limits of emotional experience. In one of Masters' video self-portraits, the viewer sees an extreme close-up of his face with a teardrop—however 'tough,' Masters is also the 'sensitive artist.' Masters' 'death' drive is linked to his art and his romantic sensibility; he creates and destroys his creations which are an extension of himself. This is suggested in the opening burning of the self-portrait, in the burning of the money and its place of production, and finally, when he himself is burnt in his art studio which becomes his final work of art. The pre-occupation with death and destruction signals the masculine need to assert power; by controlling what is most threatening the male tries to

compensate for the underlying anxiety that speaks his vulnerability, his impotence and his lack of importance. Both the 'hero' and the 'villain' mirror the same tensions and anxieties inherent in the construction of masculine identity.

The double motif not only suggests the mirror, but the alter ego; Masters' is the dark side, the doppelganger, whose energies and pleasures lie in his ability to act out all that the hero cannot. The hero's potency depends on denying the alter ego and being fascinated with his own image. Masters is not constrained by the social codes of bourgeois/capitalist morality. The film clearly situates the narrative within the capitalist system of exchange. Within the context of the double motif, objects and people become interchangeable as commodities and are consequently expendable, having a fixed value.

The opening 'terrorist' sequence is followed by a montage of shots which also serves as the credit sequence. Included are images of an arid, dusty LA cityscape, Rick's girlfriend in theatrical make-up, car smash-ups and a series of shots which begin with quick close-ups of wads of money changing hands. It becomes evident that counterfeit money is being circulated in Black/Puerto-Rican working-class areas of the city—the underside of fashionable LA.

Chance's job as a federal agent aligns him with both protecting the President and the system he stands for. His specialty is spotting bad money/'play dough.' Masters' specialty is creating bad money and putting it in circulation. As Chance comments, "Masters' been making a mockery outta you, me and this whole goddamn system." Ironically "bagging" Masters involves breaking many of the laws that

Chance repeatedly professes to defend; he begins by stealing a 'contact' book and disregarding authority. He then moves on to armed robbery and is responsible for the death of an FBI agent. It is ironic that Masters, who is 'cheating' the system, is privileged by being able to afford its most coveted offerings. He lives in an elegant apartment which signifies 'luxury,' drives an expensive car and frequents an exclusive health club. Despite Masters' criminality, he is admirable as he is more adept at exploiting the system than any one else. This is part of the overall cynicism that permeates the narrative. The film recognizes the underside of the popular cultural myth that suggests that 'opportunity' and fortune are available to those individuals able enough to seize them; the film presents both the oppressed and the ruling class as being after the same goals, utilizing similar tactics. LA is depicted as a jungle where the fittest (i.e. those most able to exploit) survive.

SEX/GENDER AND THE DOUBLE

SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS are equally exploited and objectified. Chance's girlfriend is both his paid informant (her value) and his 'lover.' The term lover needs to be qualified: it is clear that Ruth must obey Chance's whims and desires as he has the power to have her thrown "back in the joint" by revoking her parole. Their love-making illustrates an additional masculine ritual. Friedkin underlines Chance's 'performance' as the 'lover' as another form of masculine posturing by highlighting his narcissistic detachment from Ruth. In the first sexual encounter presented, Chance begins to strip off his clothing while standing up and displaying himself as a desirable body. As they fall onto the bed, Chance takes the dominant position in the lovemaking. The scene is shot in an unconventional manner—instead of highlighting the woman's nudity, Chance's nude body is centred, framing his penis as the focal point of the composition. In the next shot, Ruth asks for additional money for her information and Chance brusquely comments "Uncle Sam doesn't give a shit about your expenses . . . If you want bread fuck a baker." Ruth asks him to stay awhile while Chance, clearly indifferent to her needs, doesn't bother to look at her and continues combing his hair and preparing to leave. Before Chance leaves Ruth asks what he would do if she stopped getting him information: "Have your parole revoked . . ." "You'd do that?" He doesn't reply. The entire scene serves to foreground Chance's self-absorption, his delight in his body and his pleasure in exercising his power. Ruth is necessary as an accessory to validate and acknowledge Chance's performance and heterosexual identity. She is presented as the somewhat flighty, poetic 'hippie-type' ("The stars are God's eyes . . .") who is pale and anemic-looking and is not threatening to Chance either intellectually, emotionally or physically.

Masters' sexuality is, at first, deliberately ambiguous. Masters' girlfriend, Bianca/Debra Feuer, is introduced performing with a dance troupe in a bar. The dance is highly sexualised although 'gender' is not made specific. All the dancers are dressed in black with white-face make-up and have short slicked down hair. After the performance Masters, in the dressing room, greets one of the dancers, kissing him/her heavily on the mouth. The first shot of the kiss clearly uses a male actor focusing on his masculine back and large bone structure; Friedkin wants the audience to assume that Masters' lover is a male. The following shot is identical but uses Feuer, the actress pulling off her wig to reveal her long hair. Although Masters (safely) has a girlfriend, his sexuality

remains ambiguous and potentially open to either sex. (It would have been equally easy to situate him as the loathesome demonic fag, whom the audience could then reject as "queer.") Instead, his presence in scenes with both men and women is sexually charged and open to various readings. This ambiguity is suggested in a later scene where Chance delivers the money to Masters. (Friedkin deliberately locates the 'deals' being made between the agents and Masters in locker rooms/dressing rooms where all three men are often either nude or partially undressed.) The encounter is shot in a medium two-shot showing a profile of both men facing each other in close proximity. Masters reaches down (out of the frame) commenting "Is this my package?" and proceeds to touch/fondle something. He then remarks "You're beautiful." The sexual implications are obvious when seen as a progression from the earlier mentioned shot of two men kissing. Chance returns the comment/compliment "You're beautiful" in a later scene, in the locker/dressing room where the deal is being completed, immediately preceding his death. By the time Chance is shot, he and Masters have become dangerously close to the same position.

Masters appears to treat his girlfriend as an equal, sharing his various business manoeuvres and plans. Nevertheless, she is still an "accessory" who carries out Masters' instructions. Similarly, although Masters encourages the lesbian attraction between Bianca and Serena by presenting the latter as a 'gift' to Bianca, the moment remains framed within Masters' desire. It is in his power to do the giving (and to objectify Serena, who, interestingly, is never 'heard' in the film, as a sexual toy) and the gesture need not threaten a heterosexual discourse as lesbian lovemaking is regularly incorporated into straight pornography. While the Masters/Bianca lovemaking doesn't entail objectification of either partner, the film isn't clear on the intentions behind his video taping of their lovemaking. It carries with it some of the narcissistic overtones evident in Chance's masculine posturing and fascination with the mirror. The emphasis on the body is an all-pervasive concern in the '80s which includes both genders.

In conclusion, Masters' sexuality challenges the heterosexual norms that Chance embodies; however, it remains coded within the dominant ideological construction of masculinity and exploitation inherent in patriarchal capitalism. Although a great deal of the film's energy resides in the Masters persona, he is not presented as a positive alternative. At the film's conclusion, Bianca departs with Serena (while the soundtrack plays a song about giving them a "new religion . . . It's called Baby everything's all right . . ."). Although Bianca is never stereotyped as a film noir 'femme fatale,' the departure of the two women seems more cynical than progressive given the tone of the film's ending. Vukovich has absorbed Chance's persona taking on his external posturing and mannerisms as well as his position of dominance. In the final sequence, he informs Ruth that she's "working" for him. The allusion clearly entails a form of sexual prostitution—evident by a cut to Ruth's memory insert of her lovemaking scene with Chance. Her facial response is one of contempt and frustration. It is also worth noting that the final shot of the film following the closing credits is a portrait of Chance. This is a curious departure from traditional closing credit sequences, and one might speculate that its appearance tries to compensate for killing off a 'hero' figure suddenly and in a non-heroic manner. The final events of the film work to expose the oppressiveness of masculine dominance; however, *To Live and Die in LA* leaves one with a feeling of cold cynicism. While the film cannot be expected to outline a strategy of positive change (given conditions of

production and censorship), one feels it hesitates to totally relinquish the mystique and privilege aligned with the masculine position. The final shot of Chance also evokes a kind of nostalgia for what was and cannot be.

CODES OF ADORNMENT AND BODY POSTURING

Chance

ASIDE FROM THE OPENING SEQUENCE where all the Federal agents are in formal dress, Chance, quite strikingly, never wears a suit. Unlike the other agents, Chance is unique in that he is dressed in: cowboy boots/running shoes, torn jeans, football (numbered) sweatshirts, a cowhide jacket, sunglasses. He often smokes a cigarette. This image connotes the 'Marlborough' man—the stud, the physical man, the cowboy, associated with the Western, the masculine depiction of earthy ruggedness. (It is noteworthy that this look appeals to both heterosexual and gay culture; it is an overdetermined encapsulation of one coveted concept of masculinity.)

Chance's clothing and 'posturing': leaning with one knee up, crouching, kicking, bow-legged walk etc.: connotes both the cowboy/instinctive/'natural'/self-sufficiency and a boyish energy and youthful exuberance. Hart is the only other character who dresses like an older version of the Marlborough man. He sports the mustache, the greying temples, the cowhide jacket, etc. This contemporary glamorization of the American cowboy emphasizes the romantic individuality of the unsettled wanderer, the man of action who stands outside of organized authority and signifies masculine potency. The tight jeans outline the tough lean body while the boots and leather evoke a sexualized toughness. In contrast to the American 'cowboy', Masters dresses in *black* or *white* turtlenecks and overcoats. The overall image suggests a panther-like sleekness, a casual elegance, and a knowing construction of an individualized 'look' appropriate to the creative artist. Again, unlike Chance, Masters' movements never call attention to themselves as a form of posturing. Vukovich like the other federal agents, dresses in conventional business attire of suits and ties, and conventional nondescript 'casual' clothing. This anonymous drabness sharply contrasts his final transformation where he takes on the jeans/sunglasses/leather jacket look. It never fully meshes with his short hair and bald temple, and his average nondescript body and overall presence.

It's worth noting that all three of the leading male characters appear unadorned, in states of undress or complete nudity. As already noted, many of the fiscal transactions take place in locker/dressing/steam rooms, areas which warrant their being undressed or clad in towels. This works to foreground their bodies, their sexual attractiveness in 'legitimate' circumstances. The over-exposure and explicitness of the male nudity in the film is unusual in a Hollywood movie and draws attention to its presence.

A NOTE ON FEMALE ADORNMENT

CHANCE'S GIRLFRIEND, Ruth, is often adorned in clothing which expresses her position *vis à vis* her objectification by the men around her. She wears prostitute-like clothing which projects sexuality and submissive availability: the slinky-tight dresses, fishnet stockings, g-strings. In the closing sequence when Ruth is packing to leave, she is strikingly dressed in a tailored white blouse and black skirt—an outfit which connotes a business-like deportment communicating her desire for independence and assertiveness. Masters' lover/partner

Bianca dresses in a complementary fashion to Masters. She also wears black turtlenecks/overcoats, but her clothing is tighter and 'feminized.' Both she and Masters connote a punk-trendiness which is distinctive from the more stereotyped, gender-specific clothing of Chance and Ruth.

MASCULINE ICONOGRAPHY/ACCOUTREMENTS

CARS: Chance drives a pick-up truck: a contemporary equivalent of the horse. It connotes a masculine outdoors/ruggedness befitting the rest of his look. Masters drives a dark, sleek expensive sports car (which Bianca and Serena 'inherit' at the film's close) and the federal agents drive anonymous, boring, bourgeois domestic models.

The film is overloaded with masculinized imagery which connotes both sexuality/potency and male violence/aggression. Aside from the repeated use of cars and trains which emphasize speed/action/movement, the film foregrounds an assortment of male sexual/destructive iconography in the form of rifles, guns and other 'rods' (notably the fishing rod). The film's spectacular car chase celebrates the male's power to demolish and destroy. In addition, it serves as a legitimized emotional outlet for male rage/homoerotic sexuality. Both Chance and Vukovich share an intensified experience of an extremely dangerous, life-threatening situation. Chance's jump off the bridge brings together a number of these motifs: the fishing rod gift (Chance is attached to a wire line), the bridge which suggests the car/road/'wandering' thematic, and the opportunity to experience a highly-charged release of emotions in a physically dangerous feat.

THE SEXUALIZED USE OF SPACE

THE USE OF SPACE in the film is uncharacteristic in its repeated use of locations directly or indirectly associated with male sexuality. Like the other masculine discourses noted, it is overstated. It becomes evident that the viewer is being encouraged to observe the characters within their environments.

The Nightclub/bar is within Masters' domain and is dark, sexually ambiguous and slightly decadent. (Its cinematic predecessor is the film noir bar.) Chance's equivalent to this is the strip joint where Ruth works as a cashier. In the strip bar, women dancers are objectified for the male gaze. In the nightclub where Bianca works the dance is purposely obscured in terms of gender and is sexual without objectifying the male or female dancers. In the scene where Vukovich frantically tries to call Chance, he is in a very masculinized neighborhood bar—the scene opens with a close-up of the video screen image of a boxing match.

The locker/dressing rooms: these are located in Masters' health club and evoke the physical, the male body in a socially acceptable milieu. Chance's deals with Masters are enacted here. It is also the site of his death. (It is worth mentioning the film's sophisticated use of color as a consistent visual motif. As evident in the title credits, red and green predominate. Red splashes visually underline blood/violence. Red is also used as an obvious accent in the black and white dressing room scene in the red towels the men wear; when Chance is shot the towels are visually replaced by blood. Red is linked to the 'green' motif (LA palms, greenbacks—American money) in the scene where Masters produces the counterfeit bills using a blood-red paste, and in the fire/inferno motif that permeates the narrative.)

Men's rooms: A number of scenes take place in male public washrooms. One scene foregrounds this space by opening

with a close-up of the words *Men's Room*, followed by Chance and Vukovich emerging in a heated, physical confrontation. The entire filmic space can be conceived in these terms.

Living Spaces: Chance lives in a bachelor 'pad' overlooking the foam of the Pacific (a space which suits the Marlborough image). Masters lives in a "classy"/elegant, spacious, artistically designed apartment.

The Monastery: Chance and Vukovich use a room in a monastery to stake out Waxman's home/office. This unlikely location links the men to another socially legitimate living space for men to live together (in a sexually repressive environment).

All these spaces exist within the broader location of Los Angeles which is in itself a kind of character-presence in the movie. Its cityscapes are filmed in an orangey light connoting an inferno. It is also dusty, arid, bleached and grimy. Many of the shots include trash yards, run-down neighborhoods, train tracks and endless roads and bridges. This relates *To Live and Die in LA* to the 'noir' tradition which situates the narrative in the corrupt urban centres of America.

SEXUALIZED LANGUAGE

WHEREAS WE DON'T have the opportunity to elaborate upon or theorize the significance of the heavily anal/sexualized use of language, it is like many of the other codes/motifs already discussed, foregrounded by its excessiveness and relentlessness. The dialogue serves as an additional release for pent-up anger/rage and homoerotic repression.

- Hart (about Chance):
"Nobody I'd rather have backing me up"
"Such a fucking hot-dog"
- Cody to Masters (moments from the dialogue in the prison scene):
"... like every other swinging dick makes it ... yeah, the cheque is in the mail and I promise not to come in your mouth ..."
- Waxman:
"Tell Rick he can kiss my ass ..."
"I would never fuck with Rick ..."
- Chance (describing his jump to Vukovich)
"your balls go up to your throat ..."
- Masters to Waxman (before shooting him in the groin):
"Your taste is in your ass ..."
- Ruth to Chance:
"if you had any balls you'd jump off that bridge ..."
- Chance to nondescript hoodlums:
"I'll throw your ass over the bridge ..."
- Black man's/Jeff's description of the counterfeit money:
"... mother-fucking paper ..."
- Jeff's description of Masters' car:
"... that piece of shit ..."
- Cody in the prison yard:
"... They're gonna move on somebody ..."
- Chance to Cody:
"Anyone who would hand in a friend is a piece of shit ..."
- Masters to Jeff:
"then you better shit forty grand ..."
"... in a pig's ass ..."
- Jeff to Masters:
"... shag ass out of my crib ..."
- Masters to Jeff:
"suck on this (gun) till you give me back my paper ..."
- Chance to the prison/government official:
"If I was one of your ass-hole cronies you'd be spread-eagled on your desk to do this for me."

- Chance to Cody:
"you're pulling my dick ..."
- Grimes to Vukovich:
"Masters had the balls to threaten me ..."
- Masters to Chance:
"I've never fucked a customer out of his money."
- Chance describing Thomas Ling as
"... taking down a douche bag."
- Chance to Vukovich:
"you ain't got the nuts ... Kiss my ass ..."
- Chance's note to Ling:
"Hello asshole"
- Chance drives up the "Wrong Way—Do Not Enter" exit on the freeway.
- Chance to Masters' bodyguard:
"... don't touch me dick-head ..."
- Chance's last words to Masters (which echo the latter):
"Suck on this."
- Masters to Vukovich:
"... you wouldn't roll over on your partner."

THE CODE OF RAGE/VIOLENCE

IN SUMMATION, the most all-pervasive code that informs all the others is that of masculine rage and its expression through violence. The impact of the violence is notably male-directed. Repeatedly the central characters are severely kicked (and in Waxman's case actually shot) in the groin/genital area. In the scene where Chance robs Ling, he insists on having Ling strip and pull his pants down at gunpoint. The action is clearly unnecessary and excessive, made evident by Vukovich's surprised look and response, "What do you mean ... let's get outta here ...". Both Chance and Masters force guns in other men's mouths with the comment, "Suck on this."

Although the film initially justifies Chance's rage as being the result of Hart's gruesome death, aggressive violence is central to all the characters in the film across all classes and is part of the larger 'jungle' motif of the film: everyone exploits everyone else in order to survive and, outside of the 'buddy' allegiance, no one can be trusted (which makes the buddy system all that more sacred to the initiated). One can theorize that part of the aggression results from the return of repressed homoerotic drives; however, this is one aspect of the film's concerns and must be placed within a wider social context of power relations, class domination and the pressure resulting from the rigid demands of masculine identity. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to analyze and account for the source of this rage; its existence in the contemporary American cinema is transgeneric and fuels varying characterizations and narrative concerns from *Rocky* to *Rambo* to *Indiana Jones* to *Gremlins* to the Bronson/Norris/Eastwood cycles, to the works of distinguished directors like de Palma, Cimino and Scorsese. Unlike the films which celebrate aggression and the omnipotent hero who channels his rage into the defence of the American 'way,' *To Live and Die in LA* significantly identifies male dominance as a state of things which is both all-pervasive yet remains unacknowledged. □

END NOTES

1. See Susan Sontag's "Fascinating Fascism," in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980).
2. *White (K) Nights* presents a racially 'integrated' black/white buddy team. This seems to reflect a current trend to acknowledge in a token manner the lack of American racism. The star of the film is clearly Baryshnikov.

The Woman's Nightmare

Masculinity in *Day of the Dead*

by Robin Wood

It is perhaps the lingering intellectual distrust of the horror genre that has prevented George Romero's 'Living Dead' trilogy from receiving recognition for what it undoubtedly is: one of the most remarkable and audacious achievements of modern American cinema. Now that it has been completed by *Day of the Dead* one can see it clearly for what it always promised to be: the most uncompromising radical critique of contemporary America that is possible within the terms and conditions of a popular 'entertainment' cinema.

One particularly unfortunate and misleading critical strategy has been to collapse the three films into each other as if they were not distinguished by crucial differences. For a start, there is the very marked difference of tone, established most obviously by broad differences of format: grainy black-and-white for *Night of the Living Dead*, bright lighting, garish colors, lavish decor for *Dawn of the Dead*, subdued lighting, drab colors, a totally depleted decor for *Day of the Dead*.

Corresponding to this is the presence or absence of humor: *Night* has a kind of brutal, sardonic humor mainly directed at the posse of zombie-destroyers and the figures of authority (including the father-of-the-family); *Dawn* has a pervasive satirical humor directed at consumer-capitalism; unless I have missed it (as the film is banned in Ontario one cannot have the experience of seeing it with a large audience), humor, like bright colors, has been eliminated from *Day* altogether (though its military figures are certainly grotesque one never finds them funny). More important—and again the differences correspond—one must see the films historically, in terms of Romero's changing responses to changes in American society and ideology: *Day* relates as significantly to Reaganite America (and to the cinema it has typically produced) as *Night* did to the America of the Vietnam period.

In fact, although certain motifs recur and are developed through the three films (most obviously, the presence of a black as the most intelligent and aware of the male characters), Romero never repeats himself. If the films constitute an

The death of Miguel (Antone DiLeo).



assault on the structures and assumptions of patriarchal capitalism, the specific target is different in each, and once that target has been hit the attack is not repeated. Thus *Night* deals centrally with the nuclear family, its inner tensions, its oppressiveness, the resentments and frustrations it tries to conceal or repress (relating the film to the general movement of the genre since *Psycho*); after that, the family is dropped entirely as a concern of the films. *Dawn* is centred on consumerism, the obsession with status and possessions, and on our culture's (and its cinema's) dominant couple-relationships: heterosexual marriage and the 'male buddy' syndrome. Romero ends *Dawn* by permitting the escape (provisional, because there may be nowhere left to escape to) of the two people (male and female, but not romantically involved) who have learnt to extricate themselves from the dominant patterns, the ideological norms; the woman is pregnant. In writing on the film I commented that Romero appeared to have set himself a formidable challenge for the sequel, the challenge to define what new, non-oppressive human relations might be. Perhaps he never saw it in those terms: all three films avoid the conventional 'happy ending' (construction of the heterosexual couple) by finally avoiding the issue of sexuality altogether. *Day* sidesteps the hypothetical challenge in favor of a new assault on patriarchy from another direction: *Dawn*'s subordinate concern with structures of masculinity (in its treatment of the 'buddy' relationship and its parodic extension to the motorcycle gang) becomes the central concern of *Day*.

The ending of *Dawn* played upon two emblems of masculinist power: the surviving male surrenders his rifle voluntarily to the zombies; the woman (earlier treated by the men as the traditional 'helpless female') pilots the helicopter. Weapons and technology, militarism and science: the emblems of rifle and helicopter represent two of the major extensions of socially constructed masculinity into the symbolic realm. The radical feminist analysis of masculinity is plainly relevant here, and it is obvious from *Day* that Romero understands and endorses it. Whether biologically male or female we are born both 'masculine' and 'feminine' (active and passive, etc.) and bisexual; patriarchy separates this out, constructing what our culture regards as 'real men' and 'real women.' This clearly has many ramifications (all detrimental to our common humanity and to human relations of every kind). One is the association of masculinity with power and domination: the symbolic extensions of patriarchal dominance include, for example, imperialism, war (never to be confused with revolutionary uprising), fascism, state terrorism (Reagan's support of the contras), the arms race. If militarism is the most obvious manifestation of the masculinist ideology, science has also been conscripted in its support. The logical ultimate extension of masculinity is the end of the human race, in the interests of domination.

Day of the Dead is absolutely unequivocal on this issue. All Romero's films tend to the schematic (one might see it as either a strength or a limitation). Each of the trilogy's first two parts is built on a triangular structure: the central group of characters, who represent certain forms of human potential, however compromised, threatened by both the living dead and a malevolent, strongly masculinized human group (the redneck posse in *Night*, the motorcycle gang in *Dawn*). The films then suggest parallels between the three groups, developing patterns of similarity and difference. In *Night*, for example, the father of the nuclear family is given characteristics in common with the rednecks outside, and the family's internal tensions become a literal devouring of each other when family members become zombies; in *Dawn*, the pleasure in gratuitous violence to which Roger surrenders (presented as a kind of hysterical showing-off for the benefit of his black buddy) is

taken up (after his death) in the mindless devastations of the motorcycle gang. In *Day*, this triangular structure is extended: the central group of sympathetic characters (as in *Dawn* four people, three men and a woman) is set against *three* variously monstrous antagonists, the zombies, the military, and the scientist Dr. Logan, appropriately nicknamed 'Frankenstein.' Again, the members of the group are ambiguously related to all three: themselves either scientists (Sarah) or soldiers (Miguel her lover) or peripherally attached to the authorities (John the West Indian flies the military helicopter, the Irishman Bill McDermott is the electronics expert), they progressively dissociate themselves through their actions and attitudes from their nominal allegiances.

The increasing bleakness and desperation of the trilogy—scarcely an unreasonable response to America's 'progress' into the Reagan era, and certainly not a hysterical one (*Day of the Dead* is a perfectly controlled movie)—is marked most obviously by the increasing power of the zombies. In *Night* they could still, apparently, be contained (though the film's attitude to the forces of containment remained resolutely negative and ironic); in *Dawn* they appeared to be getting the upper hand, though the surviving characters could still fly off with the possibility that there might be somewhere safe where resistance was still feasible. In *Day* they have taken over the world, outnumbering the humans (according to Dr. Logan's calculations) by 400,000 to one, and the only place to fly to is a desert island that may exist only in fantasy. Crucial to the sense of all the films is the relationship of the zombies to the humans. In *Night* they are evoked by tensions within the nuclear family (the brother and sister arguing, teasing and antagonizing each other in the cemetery where their father is buried, over which flies the stars-and-stripes), and there is much emphasis on family members devouring each other. In *Dawn* the notion of consumption is extended to consumer-capitalism: the zombies gravitate to the shopping-mall because it was important to them when they were alive, and the human characters are for a time fascinated by the prospect of endless and unlimited consumption until they realize that, now void of the capitalist allurements of status and competition, it doesn't mean anything. The progress from *Dawn* to *Day* is epitomized in the films' images of money: in *Dawn* it is still worth helping oneself from the mall bank, 'just in case'; in *Day*, money blows about the abandoned city streets, so much meaningless paper.

It is in *Dawn* that the zombies are first defined, by the human characters, as 'us,' and the definition is taken up in *Day*, though there only by the film's monstrous scientist, embodying his 'scientific' view of human nature. Its implications need to be carefully pondered, as it is obviously both true and false. The zombies are human beings reduced to their residual 'instincts'; they lack the functions that distinguish human beings, reason and emotion, the basis of human communication and human society. (The zombies never communicate, or even notice each other, except in terms of an automatic 'herd' instinct, following a leader to the next food supply.) The characters in all three films are valued precisely according to their potential to distinguish themselves from the zombies, their ability to demonstrate that the zombies are *not* 'us'. Something clearly needs to be said about my use of the term 'residual instincts.' I am not referring here (and neither is the film, despite Dr. Logan's commitment to such essentialist notions) to some God- or nature-given human essence. Certainly one might claim the need for food as a 'natural' instinct, but *Day* is quite explicit on that score: 'They don't eat for nourishment.' What we popularly call 'instincts' are in fact largely the product of our conditioning, and the residual instincts represented by the zombies are those conditioned by

patriarchal capitalism. Above all, of course, they consume *for the sake of consuming* (a revelation of *Day*—it was not apparent in the earlier films); all good capitalists are conditioned to 'live off' other people, and the zombies simply carry this to its logical and literal conclusion. But it is through 'Bub,' Dr. Logan's prize zombie-pupil, that the theme is most fully developed. What Bub learns—through a system of punishments (beatings) and rewards (raw human flesh) that effectively parodies the basis of our educational system—is 'the bare beginnings of civilised behavior': in fact, the conditioned reflex. It is Logan's thesis—his hope for the human future—that the zombies can be trained, and to prove it he trains Bub to perform precisely the actions he was trained to perform in life, saluting and firing guns, subservience and violence. The full savagery of the film's irony can be gauged from the fact that he also responds—with the same automatism—to the Beethoven 'Choral' Symphony. Indeed, Schiller's 'Alle Menschen werden Bruder' takes on multiple ironic connotations in relation to all the film's major groups, soldiers, scientists, zombies; and his (already thoroughly conditioned) sexism, that verbally excludes women from the universal 'brotherhood' receives its implicit answer in the trilogy's progressive emphasis on women, to which I shall return.

First, however, I want to take up a point from the only review of *Day of the Dead* I have read, in the *Village Voice*, in which the reviewer compared the film to Hawks' *The Thing* (1951), finding that Romero reversed Hawks' values: the earlier film favored the military over the scientists, *Day* favors scientists over military. This rests, I think, on a partial misreading of both films, between which there is indeed a close relationship, and one much more complex than that of simple opposition or reversal. Superficially, it is true that Hawks favors his military men (the airmen of the Arctic base) over at least his leading scientist Dr. Carrington (who has major characteristics in common with *Day*'s Dr. Logan); but they are favored for what they embody as human beings, not at all for militarism. Hawks underplays all sense of hierarchy (along with patriotism, which scarcely interests him at all): the men, whatever their rank, become individual and equally valued members of a typical Hawksian male group. What is celebrated in them (as also in the relationship between Captain Hendry and the woman Nikki) is their capacity for spontaneous affection and mutual respect, the pleasure in contact and communication that is fundamental to any valid community: they correspond, in fact, rather closely to Romero's 'good' characters, and not at all to his military men.

Romero, of course, being far more politically conscious than Hawks and living in the Reagan era, sees precisely what Hawks—perhaps naively, perhaps deviously—chooses to ignore: the fact that the military are an institution, and an institution embodying in its extreme form the masculinity that pervades and structures the entire power hierarchy of our culture. If *Day* as a whole must be seen as a response to Reaganite America, its presentation of 'masculinity' in its military characters is specifically a response to Reaganite cinema—to the contemporary mindless celebration of the masculine in the *Rocky* and *Rambo* films, in figures like Norris and Schwarzenegger. *Day* presents this in sexual terms (the overvaluation of the phallus, the obsession with 'size') and in more general terms of aggression and domination. As there is nothing subtle about the phenomenon, so there is nothing subtle about the presentation: masculinity, here, is rendered as caricature, grotesque and gross, the implication being that there is nothing more to be said about it. Is this presentation, in fact, any more gross than the general celebration of masculinity in contemporary cinema? What Romero captures, magnificently, is the *hysteria* of contemporary masculinity, the



'Bub' (Howard Sherman) learns 'the bare beginnings of civilised behaviour.'



very excesses of which testify to an anxiety, a terror. In *Day*, the grossness of the characters is answered, appropriately, by the grossness of their deaths: dismemberment and evisceration as the ultimate castration, against the threat of which the Stallone/Norris syndrome can be read as the hysterical reaction. The militarist mentality, and what it produces, gets its ironic comment when Bub, having shot Captain Rhodes, dutifully salutes him as he is torn apart by the zombies.

That the film favors the scientists is, however, another partial misconception. It is true that Sarah, the film's most positive figure, is a scientist, just as Nikki in *The Thing* was associated with the scientists' group (though in the subordinate role of secretary). Yet in both films the woman is valued partly for the way in which she dissociates herself from the values science embodies. 'Science' in *Day of the Dead* is 'Dr. Frankenstein,' and it is revealed as yet another symbolic extension of masculinist ideology. If what distinguishes the human beings from the zombies is their potential for reason and emotion, then the science of Dr. Logan represents the over-valuation of a certain kind of rationality at the expense of other distinctively human qualities. The film is not exactly anti-science; neither was *The Thing*. In Hawks' film the monster is finally destroyed by the functional use of scientific knowledge; in *Day*, technology and knowledge provide the means of escape, in the form of the helicopter and John's ability to fly it. Both films make a similar distinction between knowledge placed at the service of human beings and knowledge as a means to power and domination: if 'masculinity' as constructed in our culture has led to war, imperialism, aggression, the arms race, it has equally led to the domination—and destruction—of nature. Rationality has traditionally been claimed by men as an essentially male attribute, and as the justification for their power; women are fobbed off with

'female intuition' as compensation. One can certainly argue that it is men who are the greater losers. The 'rational,' from this perspective, is what the conscious mind works out for itself without assistance, while the 'intuitive' is what the conscious mind comes to understand when it allows itself close contact with the subconscious and with the emotional levels of human psychic activity. Dr. Logan's science is rational in this limited and limiting sense, its results disgusting, dehumanizing and ultimately useless (the film presents him as increasingly bloodsoaked as the action progresses). On the other hand, there is nothing *irrational* about the decisions and actions of the positive characters: like the sympathetic characters in *The Thing*, they simply permit their reason to remain in touch with actual human needs.

Central to the trilogy's progress is the development throughout the three films of the leading female characters. Barbara in *Night* becomes virtually catatonic near the beginning and remains so through most of the action, a parody of female passivity and helplessness; Fran in *Dawn* is at first thoroughly complicit in the established structures of heterosexuality then learns gradually to assert herself and extricate herself from them (her rejection of marriage is crucial to this development). In *Day* the woman has become, quite unambiguously, the positive centre around whom the entire film is structured. Strikingly androgynous in character, she combines without strain the best of those qualities our culture has traditionally separated out as 'masculine' and 'feminine': strong, decisive and resourceful, she is also tender and caring, and she shows no desire to dominate. As a scientist, she wants to understand what has produced the zombies so that the process might be reversed; Logan wants to control the zombies, turning them into his slaves. Initially antagonistic, she progressively associates herself with the two men who have

Captain Rhodes asserts his masculinity (Lori Cardille, Joseph Pilato).



opted out of the military vs. scientist conflict; she effectively learns, in fact, to abandon any attempt to save American civilisation, which the film characterizes as a waste of time. Her lover, Miguel, is the least masculine of the soldiers, tormented indeed (partly under the goads of the other men) by the failure of his masculinity, and provoking disasters by his attempts to reassert it.

The film begins and ends with Sarah awakening from a nightmare of being assaulted by the zombies: the overtones of rape link the zombies to the military, who repeatedly threaten her with just that. This formal device produces complicated narrative ambiguities. We are given no sense of where the final nightmare (the zombies are inside the helicopter, and attack Sarah as she climbs in) begins: it is possible to read the entire film as the woman's nightmare, with the exception of the brief coda where Sarah wakes up on the beach of a tropical island, the two men fishing nearby (though, paradoxically, that ending validates the nightmare's 'reality'). However, the abruptness and implausibility of this 'happy ending' (a striking instance of what Sirk called the 'emergency exit') encourages an opposite reading: the body of the film is the reality, the epilogue a wish-fulfilment fantasy (perhaps Sarah's fantasy as she dies, perhaps simply the film-maker's ironic comment): the island image forms part of the decor of John's room in the underground shelter. Romero allows one to read the film optimistically if one wishes: the final image relates back to John's solution, that they fly away to an island and have babies who will be reared without ever even having to know that the whole legacy of American culture existed. ('Teach them never to come here and dig these records out'—the records of '... the top five hundred companies, the defence department budget, the negatives of all your favorite movies ...'—effectively, the records of the economic base and the ideological superstructure of American capitalism: 'This is a great big fourteen-mile tombstone with an epitaph on it that nobody's going to bother to read.') Obviously, the optimism is heavily qualified: the zombies have taken over the entire world and, while they can't reproduce, they appear not to die unless deliberately slaughtered; and the notion of flying away to an island is established, near the beginning of the film, as a form of hedonistic escapism. The ambiguity renders even this limited hope for any human future tentative and uncertain, and we are permitted no hope whatever for American (Western, masculinist) civilisation. It is an extraordinary film to come upon in the midst of the *Rockys*, the *Rambos*, the *Back to the Futures*, that dominate our present era: scarcely surprising that a film that goes so strongly against the current of its age has not been a commercial success. □

Postscript

Day of the Dead has been banned in its entirety by the Ontario Censor Board (now known euphemistically as the 'Film Review Board'—the hypocrisy is as flabbergasting as many of its decisions). Ontario censorship has become almost proverbial not only in Canada but across the world, and its pitiful provincial absurdities and confusions are perhaps not worth lingering on. A typical detail, however: One of the reasons for banning the film is that it contains 'racist slurs.' It does indeed: Miguel is referred to as a 'spick,' and John is called a 'jungle-bunny.' These racist slurs are put into the mouths of the film's militarist rednecks, who are totally discredited and foregrounded as its more despicable characters; the 'spick' becomes the movie's Christ-figure, the black is its most positive male character. It appears that in Ontario decisions as to what films we are or are not permitted to see are

made by people incapable of reading them on even the most elementary level.

What troubles me more is that no one seems to care. The simultaneous banning of Paul Morrissey's *Mixed Blood* provoked such an uproar from our local journalist critics that the censor board relented and allowed a series of limited screenings. I have not seen *Mixed Blood* but I am familiar with much of Morrissey's earlier work, and I have to say that I think there is something deeply wrong with a film culture that shrieks lustily—and to a degree effectively—about the banning of a Morrissey film, while treating the banning of Romero's masterpiece to date, and one of the very few really intelligent American films of the '80s, with utter indifference.

P.P.S The latest news is that the film—or mangled shreds of it—may after all get a release in Ontario. The censor board has demanded over 100 cuts.

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Radical Marginalia:

Subversive Signs from the Hinterland

by Geoff Pevere

IN 1985, A TEAPOT-TEMPEST occurred in the exclusive and sparsely-populated realm of Canadian film criticism.* Set in motion by the Toronto Festival of Festivals' unprecedentedly comprehensive retrospective of Canadian cinema (called, with characteristic commercial panache, "Northern Lights"), the brouhaha really began with the publication of a series of Canadian film-related articles inspired by the retrospective and commissioned by *Canadian Forum* magazine. Among the essays (in *Canadian Forum* February 1985), which included pieces on the NFB, Quebec films by women, and a discussion of images of masculinity in Canadian cinema (by myself), there appeared a manifesto of sorts by critic-teacher-filmmaker R. Bruce Elder, provocatively entitled "The Cinema We Need." Pedantic in expression and portentous in tone, Elder's theoretically prescriptive article (doubtless in response to a generation-old effort by some critics of Canadian film to delineate the unique cultural characteristics of Canada's spotty cinematic tradition), called for a complete

reconception of what a distinctly Canadian cinema is and, most significantly, should be.

Decrying the ideological yoke imposed by the narrative-realist tradition of Canadian (if not western) literature and cinema, Elder proposed a mode of cinema for Canadians that would distinguish itself from other national cinemas with a non-narrative, anti-realist form designed to alter patterns of consciousness and perception as much as to educate and (god forbid) entertain. Sounding suspiciously like a blueprint for the cinema Elder himself makes, it came as no surprise that, of all the articles on Canadian film-related matters printed in that particular issue of *Canadian Forum*, Elder's churned up the most—if not the only—feedback.

Certainly the most extensive and ambitious response came in the pages of *Cinema Canada* (July-August 1985), which ran (under the heading "The state of Canadian cinema: A critical debate") no fewer than six articles responding to, criticizing and interpreting "The Cinema We Need." While the arguments ranged in tone, methodology and emphasis, collectively they comprised a sort of minor event in the already minor practice of Canadian film criticism. Elder's prescription for the cinema Canadians ought to have, with its suggestion that the entire realist-documentary tradition (the tradition most scholars of Canadian film had coveted and praised as the single distin-

guishing mark of Canadian cinema worth boasting about) ought to be eighty-sixed in favor of hardcore experimental movies, triggered the most vital epistemological debate on the role and purpose of the criticism of Canadian cinema (and just what *that* means) since Don Shebib was hailed as English Canada's first fully-constituted auteur.

(Not that this caused any serious tremors outside of *Cinema Canada's* specialized pages. In the tradition of other great Canadian cultural events, like the 1837 rebellion, the Guess Who reunion and Expo '86, no one found the event quite as stirring as the participants themselves. I was one them.)

While all of the *Cinema Canada* articles, to a greater or lesser extent, concerned themselves with the basic if murky problems of what Canadian cinema is or ought to be, and how it should be dealt with in critical terms, perhaps the most provocative and succinct response to Elder came in the form of a dismissal of sorts of the entire pedagogical process of Canadian film criticism. Moreover, it appeared not in the context of *Cinema Canada's* sprawling special issue, but in the back of *Canadian Forum's* pages, in the context of Robin Wood's then-regular film column. Wood, an intimidatingly prolific, perceptive and persuasive film theorist and critic, has never indicated much of an interest in Canadian film as a subject for criticism (even though he lives and works in Canada), and his

* By this I mean criticism of Canadian cinema and not cinema criticism by Canadians. The difference is not entirely semantic: while the latter implies an activity conducted by virtually every mainstream media outlet across the country, the former suggests a far more tentative, ill-defined and sporadic critical process.

characteristically articulate and pointed dismantling of Elder's theoretical blueprint for a national cinema allowed him for the first time to explain this indifference. For Wood, the process of film criticism and analysis is—and must be—a political act engaged in a constant struggle with the operations of dominant ideology as they operate through dominant cultural discourse. While this has meant the retrieval from the dustbins of dismissal of such customarily maligned genres as the horror movie and the teenflick, and the rescuing of such directors as Michael Cimino and Larry Cohen from the limbo of critically-imposed obscurity, it has not permitted any extensive or serious engagement with Canadian cinema. For Wood, the struggle to oppose dominant ideological forces has naturally led to the site where those forces are most apparent and powerful: the Hollywood cinema. In this particular column (*Canadian Forum*, 1985), he expressed the conviction that, on these grounds, Canadian cinema just wasn't worth getting one's fingers inky over: as a minor but indistinguishable part of the overall apparatus of western capitalist cultural production, Canadian cinema collaborated in the reproduction of Western capitalist ideology, but—thanks to the invisibility factor imposed on Canadian commercial cinema by a distribution and exhibition system that privileges Hollywood product—without the negative impact and influence that Hollywood movies have.

Talk about your blow of blows: in the context of a debate already fueled by profound and generations-old feelings of cultural inferiority—perhaps the one unifying thread of all Canadian film criticism has been the attempt to defend Canadian movies from charges of innate inferiority—Wood was suggesting that Canadian film *wasn't worth talking about*.

Yet, from the perspective of Wood's agenda, truth to tell, much of Canadian cinema isn't worth wasting ink over. As a patriarchal capitalist western democracy living in the shadow of the world's most powerful patriarchal capitalist western democracy, much of Canada's pop culture output amounts to less pervasive and polished products of virtually the same ideological framework as that governing United States. (Some Canadian films, like *Joshua Then and Now* and *One Magic Christmas*, presumably not satisfied with this secondary support role, have lashed back at Hollywood's monopoly of influence on reactionary ideology with some of the

most conservative values seen on screen anywhere in the past few years. It's what comes of being number two, one presumes.)

While Canadian cinema's Lesser Hollywood status more or less accurately refers to most of the more commercially-oriented Canadian films of the past decade (and particularly the dozens of pallid genre ripoffs made during the tax shelter boom years of the late seventies), there's more to both the phenomenon—and the product—than this sweeping charge of ideological colonialism leaves room for. Without reactivating the much-regurgitated rant about the full nelson American corporate interests have on Canadian exhibition and distribution networks, it is worth mentioning this as a possible *institutional* reason for the ideological conventionalism of so much Canadian cinema: having been told for decades by branch-plant industry toadies that any Canadian movies can get a fair and equal crack at commercial prominence as long as it meets universal (read: American) standards of projected audience appeal, many (too many) Canadian filmmakers and production companies have made the cloning of commercially-proven Hollywood formulas a virtual professional grail. Not that a more economically autonomous Canadian industry would necessarily produce films radically distinguished from or opposed to the ideological framework determining Hollywood, just that it might not be so strenuously identical. If Canadian movies are merely minor echoes of Hollywood's globally-broadcast messages and structures, there's more to it than mass ideological regimentation: in Canada, Hollywood-identification is as much a matter of economic necessity as it is ideological indoctrination.

But the principal failing in Wood's argument, accurate as it is in terms of most mainstream Canadian movies, is a failure as much of rhetoric (and probably access) as it is scholarship. Like many who dismiss or deride Canadian cinema—and for far less just or reasoned cause—Wood is probably not familiar with the products of those rarified and spartan realms of film production where precisely the kind of oppositional and antagonistically anti-establishment filmmaking in Canada frequently does take place. If there's a context in Canadian filmmaking where—as I hope to demonstrate—the questioning and challenging of ideological and aesthetic norms is something close to common, it's in the marginalia

of an already-marginalized industry: films, that is, of low-budget, independent, and regional persuasion.

But before proceeding with a defense of non-mainstream Canadian cinema as a cinema with a strong and consistent tendency to subversive (and occasionally even radical) intent, it's probably necessary to address some common and legitimate reservations about the whole process of cultural criticism tainted with a nationalistic or regional bias. Besides Wood's implied objection that the discussion of national cinemas, in some contexts, erects arbitrary geographical distinctions between cinemas situated within the same ideological apparatus, there is the simpler but equally relevant mistrust of cultural nationalism as an expression of conservative jingoism and isolationism. Both are legitimate objections, and not casually dismissed. They can however, be defused, particularly in the context in which I hope to introduce and defend certain independent and/or regional Canadian productions as Canadian productions.

First there is the whole termite-ridden question that sits at the foundation of practically all Canadian cultural debates, that of What is Canadian? Often this has been flippantly responded to as Anything Not American, but the ostensible flippancy of the response obscures its relevancy as a possible avenue for understanding the potential to radicalism that exists in most forms of Canadian cultural activity. If the process of defining Canadianism is unavoidably determined by the simultaneous process of denying Americanism (and it frequently is, for obvious reasons), then there exists in the Great Canadian Identity Hunt a constant potential for the rejection not only of American economic and cultural domination, but of American ideological domination as well. Not that it often does, but the act of defining something's Canadian-ness can involve a confrontation with more than just an unbalanced legislative apparatus—it can create the context for ideological confrontation as well. Whether or not not-being-American necessarily implies being Canadian remains a highly contentious assertion, but the rejection of Americanism—such a significant part of this country's academic struggle for self-definition—can involve the recognition and subsequent rejection of the structure of values being American has come to represent: values of patriarchy, capitalism, individualism and heterosexuality.

Given that the rejection of American can imply the rejection of dominant



Sky Gilbert as Shadow in *Listen to the City*: the face of cool, corporate malevolence.

western ideology most powerfully purveyed by American culture, politics and media, there exists, embedded in the process of cultural self-definition in Canada, the constant *potential* for subversive and radical responses to that ideology. It is my proposal that, in the context of Canada's marginal independent and regional film production, this potential to subversion is frequently realized.

What follows is an attempt (albeit a methodologically shaky one) to illustrate the ways in which this impulse to subversion has manifested itself—to varying degrees—in a select group of rarely-seen Canadian low-budget, independent and/or regionally-produced features. The selection is, admittedly, wholly impressionistic and arbitrary—I'm certain anyone with the impulse to do so could come up with a list of flagrantly reactionary Canadian indies. But that list, I'm certain, would be shorter than mine, and mine is already shorter than it could be.

What follows is also a thinly-disguised exercise in boosterism. For the most part, I admire and enjoy the films I'm writing about, and am constantly pained by their unknown status outside of select and specialized circles. Which

is why I've included distribution sources for all titles under discussion: I hope some *CineAction!* readers will be sufficiently intrigued by their descriptions to seek the films out for themselves. If I can rustle up some business for these movies at the same time I'm arguing for their status as subversive texts, mine will have been a job well done.

(Finally, a note on behalf of the editors of this issue, who politely requested that I somehow link the content of this article, which was intended for publication in *CineAction!* no. 5 on alternative cinema, to the theme of the representation of masculinity—this issue's focus. While the depiction of masculinity in Canadian cinema has always provided, in its persistent depiction of weakness, hypocrisy and failure, a striking counterpoint to the Hollywood male image—and this has been written about elsewhere—this difference is even more profoundly apparent when dealing with more marginal forms of Canadian cinema. Not only has there rarely been a confidence regarding assertive male behavior on view in Canadian movies, often the films' dramatic structure—as *Goin' Down the Road*, *Wedding in White* and *Videodrome*—hinges upon the contradiction between what the male char-

acters, as socialized males, feel they are capable of doing or are entitled to do, and what meagre things they actually can pull off—thus the tag, not entirely unwarranted, of Canadian cinema as the cinema of losers. This also applies, with local modifications, to each of the films discussed below. Nowhere is a confidant, assertive and active male hero to be found. These are characters that *things happen to*, not who make things happen—with the exception of the flagrantly utopian *Listen to the City*—and this distinction, in terms of the films' subversive relationship to dominant cinematic forms, it is too commonly manifested not to be considered an elementary part of their ideological discontent. Come to think of it, it's elementary enough to warrant an article of its own. Okay, editors?)

Crime Wave (1985), made in Winnipeg by John Paizs, is perhaps the most eloquent and potentially popular realization thus far of a thematic and formal concern increasingly prevalent in the work of independent Canadian filmmakers working in the feature narrative mode: the hegemony, in practical, economic and ideological terms, of American media forms and messages in Canada, and the subsequent working

towards a means of undermining that hegemony, principally through parody and Brechtian-derived modes of distancing. This concern makes postmodernism more than just an aesthetic indulgence for oppositional independent filmmakers in Canada, it is a necessary deconstructive strategy (as well as a possible inevitability), a rich means of making strange the otherwise "naturally" pervasive conventions and attitudes of American and American-modelled popular media in Canada.

An archly ironic, over-the-rainbow wish-fulfillment fantasy that casts a near-catatonic young Canadian scriptwriter in a Dorothy Gale role, *Crime Wave* renders the Canadian obsession with (and assimilation of) American pop media in formal and thematic terms, thus effectively reproducing both the apparent and covert—or economic and ideological—levels of media infiltration by American popular culture in Canada. Structured in two parts, *Crime Wave*'s first section introduces us to the principles: the would-be "colour crime movie" writer Steven Penny (John Paizs); Eva (Eva Kovacs), the girl who narrates the film, and over whose family's garage Steven struggles with selective writer's block (his beginnings and endings are great, but he can't muster any middles); and the various fictional characters Steven creates who have the diegetically-disruptive habit of spilling out of their proper narrative contexts to party and brawl with each other in his tiny room.

Assembled with the rigidly cubistic *mise-en-scène*, and deliberate punchline pacing of American TV comedy, *Crime Wave*'s first section suggests schizoid sitcom, as the diegetic spillover of subconscious projections into the conscious world performed by Steven's precocious fictional characters constantly threatens to undermine the otherwise sunshiny domestic bliss of the *Leave it to Beaver*-ish setting of Steven's creative crisis. In the second part, when Steven journeys to Kansas (a clever reversal on *The Wizard of Oz*), that disruption actually occurs and the horrific reversals implied in the first half are thoroughly realized and followed through: not only does the fragile domestic security of the first half, with its sunny streets and brainlessly blissful family life give way to fear and darkness, the determining style of *Crime Wave* shifts from light TV comedy parody to murky, expressionistic horror (a disruption of tone and, one supposes, expectations, sufficiently jarring to audibly disappoint both audiences for the film's screenings at the Toronto Festival

last September). Once, in other words, Steven journeys to the Emerald City of his media-fed fantasies, America (*Kansas* even), the fragility of those conscious idealizations, and their inextricable relationship with unspeakable subconscious nightmares, is made unforgettably and unavoidably apparent. *Crime Wave*, in its (logical) movement from family sitcom to gothic horror, belies the conscious and constructed coziness of reactionary media forms (such as the family sitcom) by tracing the inevitable path to subconscious fears and anxieties those forms seek to repress. Moreover, it does so while maintaining an ironic, quite funny and finally demystifying formal fidelity to the commercial cultural forms that most effectively embody, respectively, idealized and repressed attitudes to the centrality and security of the patriarchal family in this culture: the sitcom and the horror movie.

Similarly self-reflexive in its appropriation and amplification of movie and television conventions, Bachar Chbib's *Memoirs* (1984), made in Montreal, is less interested in media operations and effects per se, than their specific consequences for a particular and essential aspect of social and political relations. A deadpan dismantling of the ideal of romantic love carried out in the context of a camped-up, post-punk melodrama, *Memoirs* is so thoroughly bled of emotional identification devices (thanks

primarily to the psychologically-flattened, largely gestural performances and the poetically overwrought dialogue, e.g., "There is no government in the night that surrounds me") that all that it leaves of romantic love are the set of socially-determined attitudes and conventions that comprise it. Influenced equally by Sirk, Fassbinder and Archie comics, and set in a noirish backalley nightworld into which Johnny Daze (Philip Baylaucq), an aspiring small town writer and practising romantic, ventures in pursuit of a young woman (Norma Jean Sanders) despite ominous admonitions not to ("People go in there and don't come back," "The dark is dangerous—there are things you can't control"), *Memoirs* dramatizes the limits of socialized notions of sexual normality with the visual and dramatic metaphor of the straight-arrow hero's passage into forbidden darkness and squalor. Once he has crossed into the id-like nightworld of the backalleys, where the clubs are always open and art is made from garbage (a not inaccurate account of what *Memoirs* itself often manages), Johnny himself is helpless to preserve whatever notions of proper sexual and romantic behavior he may have had. The backalley clubland is rife with representatives of rampant impropriety: transsexuals, gays, lesbians; and the aggressively taboo-busting ambience eventually crushes whatever romantic delusions regarding Lotta

Julia Gilmore as Ida Rage torches in *Memoirs*: the call of the wild.



Love (the garbage-collecting artist he first followed into this sexual neverneverland) Johnny may have harbored. Significantly, Lotta's own resistance to heterosexual containment grows proportionately with her obsessive feelings about the cabaret singer Ida Rage (Julia Gilmore). Entirely superfluous to this unforeseen—to him, anyway—development, Johnny himself goes cruising the alleys in search of some improper gratification, before finally boarding the bus in surrender, to return, presumably, to small town safety and heterosexual haven.

While *Memoirs'* camp strategy makes its position in relation to its material and characters frequently cloudy (it seems to ridicule and celebrate its back-alley sexual subculture in equal measure), it is unequivocal in its questioning of the authority of heterosexual monogamy, and of the threat to heterosexual hegemony posed by "abnormal" sexual practices. While the sexually-charged subculture it depicts is sinister and characterised by the grandiose expression of pretty petty feelings (Lotta frequently treats Ida Rage in a manner reminiscent of Davis' abuse of Crawford in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*), it is seen as a thriving and unrepentant subculture (if a safely contained one, for now), which does not so much threaten Johnny as treat him as an amusing curiosity. Moreover, the fact of Johnny's overwhelming exposure to (and eventual indulgence in) the alternative sexual practices and politics offered by the clubland subculture makes his final retreat hopefully ambiguous: if some of that subversive stuff rubbed off, he's taking it home with him.

Though tempered by liberal idealism and an overdependence on a romantic notion of the mystically adhesive powers of art (and the attendant shamanizing of the artist that implies), Ron Mann's *Listen to the City* (1984) is one of the very few Canadian films that not only sets an explicitly oppositional political agenda for itself, but actually follows through on its criticism of existing social structures with the provision of an alternative model. That the model itself is less than flawless is perhaps less significant than the fact that such a vision for an alternative political system, based on sexual equality and shared economic and labor responsibilities, even got made. After establishing its project with introductory titles that relate escalating unemployment rates in Canada (made in '83-'84, *Listen* is squarely a "recession" text) to a capitalistic system that can do nothing more

than aggravate a crisis of its own making, *Listen to the City* sets out to take the first tentative steps towards a new order based on the cyclical rotation of labor and leisure time among groups of workers. The overall sense of creative reconstruction that charges the film is expressed in both narrative and formal terms. The first fiction feature by a recognised documentarist (*Poetry in Motion, Imagine the Sound*), *Listen to the City* consistently articulates its strategy for the new social order with a constantly shifting formal vocabulary. Though dominated by conventional dramatic modes, their authority is sufficiently mediated by shifts in style to mock-reportage and de-psychologized parody to ensure that the distance crucial to critical viewing is maintained throughout. This is particularly useful in terms of *Listen to the City's* political agenda not merely because it observes a notion of Brechtian distancing, but because of the film's tentative tone and idealistic faith in art as a universal balm for cultural and political struggle: thus, while the film's strategy for an alternative political and social order is less that rigorous, it at least admits to it, and invites criticism by announcing its status as an *argument* as well as a fantasy. Moreover, its postmodern juxtaposition of such open forms as parody and direct address with conventional drama at least acknowledges the inarguable fact that alternative social structures necessitate new cultural forms.

Set in an unspecified city in an unspecified near future, *Listen to the City* follows a number of characters through a political and economic crisis ignited by the announcement of the closure of the city's corporate and industrial lifeline, the Lambda Corporation's factory. Though it is unequivocally established that the closure is a cynical ploy on the part of Lambda to manipulate its labor force into buying the near-bankrupt factory just before stock plummets—thus allowing the corporation to make money and appear politically progressive too—the film follows the attempts of a TV reporter (P.J. Soles) and a liberal city council administrator (Michael Glassbourg) to prove their suspicions of corporate finagling. Paralleling their efforts are the provocative but finally unsatisfactory sequences of a young musician's attempts to fuse the various aural components of a musical piece, and a wandering poet-songwriter's (Jim Carroll) prophetic incantations of the new order. Given their constant alternation with the corporate intrigue, the struggling artist

sequences imply a rather naive overconfidence in the capacity of creative struggle to transcend political turmoil. While the associations between positive social change and creative expression these sequences convey does carry a certain optimistic charge, they finally succumb to an unconvincing and impractical idealism, given the magnitude of the political problems facing the embryonic political system. Finally, this optimism and faith in art is stretched to transparency by the strain of having to function both as a radical revolutionary alternative and as a gloss over the film's lack of developed or systematic alternatives to the system it accurately depicts as bankrupt and verging on collapse. If the film is disappointing, it's precisely because it sees disturbance and trouble everywhere in the city, but it can't come up with anything more than a song for a solution.

Something of a west coast *Kaspar Hauser*, Patricia Gruben's *Low Visibility* (1984) demonstrates the arbitrary and constructed nature of subjectivity and social relations with the story of the resocialization performed on a (possibly willfully) desocialized adult by representatives of patriarchal authority. Told in an elliptical and allusive manner that testifies to Gruben's experience as an avant-gardist with particular interest in the relations between narrative and socialization—particularly as it bears upon gender definition—*Low Visibility* follows the long and reluctant journey back to discourse and socialization of Mr. Bones (Larry Lillo), who is one day found wandering on a mountain roadside. Placed in a hospital, and muttering profanities, Mr. Bones (so named by his nurses because of the small bones he obsessively covets and fidgets with) is subjected to a battery of tests, examinations and electronic surveillance: if he is fascinating to the medical authorities and the system based on logic, language and empiricism they represent, it is because Mr. Bones represents the inverse of those systems of thought and the social structures built upon them (that he thwarts all therapeutic methods based on causal connection, linearity and rational deduction with such diabolical effect is itself evidence of a systematic anti-logic). If he eventually becomes threatening to the forces of reason and normality, it is because of the unthinkable (because irrational) possibility that Mr. Bones' withdrawal from discourse might be deliberate instead of degenerate—which explains the tireless (and equally "obsessive") overdetermination of the doctors to



Philip Baylaucq as Johnny Daze in *Memoirs*: reeling from the effects of de-conventionalization.

either prove their patients nuts or reel him back into the realm of "normal" behavior: nobody could *want* to be abnormal or remain outside of accepted social norms, as that would not only challenge the hegemony, based on exclusivity, of "normality" (it's the only thing to be) but its *natural* status as well: by opting out of the structures of normality, Mr. Bones is pointing to their status as *structures*. His rejection not only underlines the arbitrary and systematic nature of thought and behavior, it implies the possibility of other, alternative modes of thought and behavior—and that is why he must be either cured or consigned to insanity.

Gruben's feminist perspective on Mr. Bones' plight manifests itself in the patient's relationship with the two nurses in his charge, the only characters other than one other patient, with whom Mr. Bones shows tolerance and a willingness to communicate. Significantly, this relationship is based upon illogic and is thus set within the terms of the alternative "normality" which the patient has set for himself and inhabits. The entry of the nurses into this realm is dictated by their own deliberate "irrationality": one communicates with Mr. Bones almost exclusively with jokes and riddles—those illogical twists of language and turns of logic so significant to Freud as emissions from the unconscious, and which rupture discourse by turning codes of language in upon themselves—and both play cut-out word collage games with him, games which are based on discovering new and revelatory relationships between randomly juxtaposed discursive elements. Not surprisingly, the male doctors neither appreciate nor understand the obviously more successful nature of Mr. Bones' relationship with the nurses, and insensitivity (based on refusal) eventually hardens to outright resentment.

Concurrent to Mr. Bones' psychiatric ordeal is the investigation being conducted of a plane crash that occurred in the vicinity where the patient was first found. Echoing the opposition of conventional to alternative therapeutic practices embodied by the doctors and nurses respectively, the crash investigation is being carried out by the police, who (like the doctors) represent an order based on reason and empiricism, and by a woman psychic, whose investigative credentials are based on such non-empirical practices as intuition and empathy. Not surprisingly, given her discredited status in regard to standards of order by reason, it is the psychic who succeeds in *understanding* Mr. Bones

while the police, like the doctors, can only examine him. Moreover, they can only do so from across the distorting distance dictated by a normality defined in oppositional terms (to what is "wrong", "bad", "abnormal", etc.), and protected by closure: what keeps the doctors and the police and the authoritarian values they serve and protect safely inside the structures of socialization is precisely what shuts Mr. Bones, and the radical alternatives to "normality" he represents, out.

This discussion was not intended to hold these films up as unassailable examples of a radically-motivated cinema in Canada. Like most feature narrative film texts, their systems of discourse are neither completely coherent or free of contradiction and, with the possible exception of *Low Visibility*

(which endorses non-participation as a revolutionary response) they do not offer particularly thorough or rigorous alternatives to the dominant social practices they all, to varying extents, oppose. It is merely out of a conviction that these films *are* oppositional, and that this opposition is motivated by specific circumstances which place many Canadian filmmakers in positions of oppression, exclusion and inferiority, that makes them I think not only worthy of note, but of serious consideration as a possible site for the growth of a potentially rich radical film practise. □

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Hero/Anti-Hero: The Dilemma of *Year of the Dragon*

by Robln Wood

THE VERY FEW AMERICAN COMMERCIAL films of the past year to which one can without absurdity apply the term 'distinguished'—*Day of the Dead*, *To Live and Die in LA*, *After Hours* and *Year of the Dragon*—have at least one feature in common: all are, in somewhat different ways and to varying degrees, unpleasant. The phenomenon is too consistent and too pronounced to be coincidental, and it inevitably provokes the question (which on closer reflection proves largely rhetorical), What type of distinguished work *could* be produced within the current political/economic/ideological conditions? What can be achieved, within the commercial system, by a film-maker who wishes to dissociate him/herself (at whatever level of consciousness or explicitness) from the overall movement of Reaganite America and of the popular cinema that is among its major ideological manifestations?—a film-maker who rejects both the aggressive fascist/masculinist tendencies embodied in the *Rocky/Rambo/Chuck Norris* movies and the comforting, 'pleasant' reassurances offered by the Spielberg school and by most '80s science fiction films? Such a film-maker cannot embrace, construct or imply the need for an alternative social/political/ideological system without moving outside the commercial cinema altogether into the limiting structures and limited audiences of the avant-garde (it is significant that, of the four films listed, the one that comes closest to implying the need for an alternative system is *Day of the Dead*, which was a. made outside Hollywood, independently, and b. a commercial failure). All that is left is to express negation (a feat most thoroughly and rigorously performed by *To Live and Die in LA*).^{*} Such a strategy is unlikely to evoke lavish returns at the box-office, in an age where the public

apparently wants either masculinist violence or thumb-sucking reassurance, but it does tap into (dangerously but interestingly) the undertow of total cynicism and disillusionment moving beneath those demands. Speaking of commercial viability, it may be said at once that the reason why *Year of the Dragon* has been the only one of the four to achieve (in terms of contemporary Hollywood economics) any significant box-office success is clearly that its unresolved confusions allow it to be assimilated into the 'masculinist' syndrome (it has actually been nicknamed 'Rambo in Chinatown').

'Unpleasantness' in a work of art can take very different forms, deriving from different sources (for the sake of convenience I shall use Hitchcock as illustration). There is the artistically authentic unpleasantness of the work that simply has terrible and disturbing things to say about life (or the conditions under which it is lived in our culture) and achieves (to borrow a phrase from Annette Kuhn) a 'passionate detachment' with which to say them (*Vertigo*). There is the work whose logical impetus is frustrated (whether by a conflict of commercial interests, through the partial intractability of the source material, etc.), resulting in an uneasy compromise (*Torn Curtain*, where the fundamental unpleasantness of the 'hero' can never be acknowledged by the film). Finally, there is the work where certain negative/neurotic personal traits of the artist have not been successfully assimilated into an aesthetic/thematic project but are merely indulged, where the unpleasantness is registered as gratuitousness and excess (the potato sack sequence of *Frenzy*). *Year of the Dragon* seems to me to partake of all three of these types, which accounts for the sense of disturbance and dissatisfaction I experience every time I see it. It must certainly be judged strictly an artistic failure: it is seriously flawed, and the flaw is

* One could certainly argue that the negativity of *After Hours* is scarcely less complete, but it is of a different order, in some respects perhaps more interestingly idiosyncratic. *King of Comedy* was singlemindedly concerned with the pursuit of the Father—De Niro wants to be him, Bernhard wants to possess him—and the film's theme was the futility and illusoriness of Oedipal desire. *After Hours* is in a sense a companion-piece. If it must be seen as a male nightmare, it is the nightmare of a world over which the Father no longer presides, in which nothing is any

longer in its 'correct' place: hence the film's emphasis on independent women and gay men. It is a world in which the protagonist (through whose eyes we see it)—a 'son' totally subject to the 'Father' of corporate capitalism—can find no position to occupy and with which he cannot cope. The film's negativity, then, arises from the decision to make *him* our sole identification figure: the world without the Father can be viewed by him only as a nightmare, but the dreamer and the position from which he dreams are given no validity either.



Climactic confrontation on the railroad (Mickey Rourke, John Lone).

central, rendering the entire work incoherent to the point of unreadability. Yet, such is its distinction, I am not sure that this establishes its inferiority to the three works with which I have bracketed it. Coherence is, after all, only one criterion; richness is another, and richness can develop not only out of complexity but out of contradiction and confusion. It is possible to prefer the artistic failure of *Year of the Dragon* to the artistic success of *After Hours*, surely the most circumscribed and least resonant of all Scorsese's films, for all its poise and brilliance.

Rather than attempt a coherent reading of a film that never successfully organizes its internal contradictions, I want to approach *Year of the Dragon* from three different routes, trying to do justice both to its distinction and its problems. I shall discuss its relationship (already very complicated) to its source, its relationship (more complicated still) to Cimino's previous (extremely complicated) work, and finally the nature of its failure.

1. Novel and film. Let it be said at once that the distinction of Cimino's film derives scarcely at all from Robert Daley's novel, as close to the unreadable that (held to my task only by the sternest sense of duty) I have ever forced myself to struggle through. Turgid, repetitive and agonizingly over-explicit (every contrived metaphor has to be laboriously explained as if the reader didn't 'get it'), the novel presents no problems other than that of turning the pages. It offers a straightforward account of the menopausal conflicts of a police captain torn between wife and lover who is determined to destroy a Chinese mafia 'godfather' divided between two

wives. The opposition/parallel is potentially interesting, but not much comes of it; the racial issue is perfectly clearcut and unconfused, American vs. Chinese 'other.' Roughly, what happens in the transition is that a coherent and uninteresting novel becomes an incoherent and interesting film. I shall not attempt to detail all the changes (it is worth mentioning that, of all the half-dozen or so really strong scenes in the movie, only one—the shooting up of the Chinese restaurant—is closely adapted from the novel); the changes that drastically affect the tone and undermine the coherence can be gathered into three groups, ethnicity, violence, age.

Ethnicity. In the novel the white protagonist (Arthur Powers) is not a 'Polack,' and his newscaster lover (Carol Cone) is not Chinese. (One's first reaction to this emphasis on immigrants is to link it to *The Deer Hunter* and *Heaven's Gate*. Doubtless this connection is important, but we should also remember that the screenwriter, Oliver Stone, also wrote De Palma's *Scarface*).

Violence. In the novel, the protagonist's wife is not murdered, his lover is not raped, and his young Chinese assistant is not killed.

Age. In the novel, Powers is well into middle age, Carol Cone is worried about growing old and losing her looks, and the Chinese antagonist (Jimmy Koy) is 'probably in his mid-forties.' The age of the protagonist in the movie is curiously indeterminate (a point to which I shall return); both Tracy Tsu (his lover) and Joey Tai (the antagonist) are strikingly younger than their counterparts.

The results of these changes are two-fold. First, the characters seem far more vulnerable, either because they are so



The Chinese restaurant (Ariane, Mickey Rourke).

young or because they are so subject to disasters or both. This sense of vulnerability, almost fragility, of being unprepared for the blows that may fall, is a clear link with Cimino's earlier work (compare Jeff Bridges in *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, Christopher Walken and John Savage in *The Deer Hunter*, most of the principal characters of *Heaven's Gate* where 'unpreparedness' becomes a leading issue). Second, most of the changes serve seriously to complicate our attitude to the film's nominal 'hero.' The three most unambiguously sympathetic characters in the film (the wife, the lover, the assistant) all explicitly denounce him at various points, and all three suffer violence (death, rape) as a direct consequence of his actions. The fact that he is himself of recent immigrant descent complicates our attitude to his moral crusade against an ethnic community, and calls into question just what it means to be a (self-proclaimed) 'American.' From this viewpoint he is related to Nate Champion (Christopher Walken) in *Heaven's Gate*, the immigrant who, wishing to define himself as an 'American,' enlists with the capitalist establishment and discovers his mistake too late. (Stanley White/Mickey Rourke, on the other hand, never discovers his 'mistake,' and the film seems very ambivalent as to whether it is one).

2. *Year of the Dragon* and Cimino. After the financial catastrophe of *Heaven's Gate* one expected a 'run for cover' movie, something safe and undemanding (and above all uncontroversial) with which Cimino could unobtrusively reinstate himself. It is surprising, then, how completely a Cimino film *Year of the Dragon* is (warts and all), in its audacity, its self-confidence, its flamboyance, its readiness to

give offence, its thematic concerns (images of America and what it means to be American, immigrant communities, capitalist oppression—the 'Chinese mafia' parallels the WASP landbarons of *Heaven's Gate*—and the role and definition of 'the hero'). There is once again that sheer flair for creating cinema that has characterized all Cimino's films to date, the intensity, vividness and energy of his *mise-en-scène* that produce a whole succession of brilliantly realized sequences (exactly how they relate to each other is another matter). I have written at length elsewhere about the architectural qualities of *The Deer Hunter* and *Heaven's Gate*. There is always a curious split in his films—more glaring than ever in *Year of the Dragon*—between the sure grasp of architecture, of overall structural design, and the very uncertain grasp of thematic coherence, of what exactly he is *saying*. Inevitably, *Dragon* lacks the extraordinary narrative/structural audacities of its two great predecessors (one wonders whether Cimino will ever again be in a position where he can pursue such experiments), but the feeling for architecture is still there. I shall isolate three aspects.

a. *Parallel development.* Perhaps taking a cue from the novel (but the effect is quite different), the film is built on the parallel between Stanley White and Joey Tai: both, throughout, are trying to assert themselves within hierarchical institutional structures that are inimical equally to personal self-aggrandisement and innovation. This implies a further parallel between the institutions—the New York police force and the Chinese mafia—that certainly complicates any simple attitude we might take to the film's basic structural opposition, America/the Chinese.

The opposition/parallel of Stanley White (the 'Polack' who, like Ella Watson and Nate Champion in *Heaven's Gate*, has chosen his own American name, and a highly charged one) and Joey Tai is reflected in the opposition/parallel of wife/lover, Connie White/Tracy Tsu (Caroline Cava and Ariane respectively). Both women refuse to be exclusively identified in relation to men, i.e. both have careers (with Connie's dedication to social work opposed to Tracy's desire for prestige and television stardom, roughly corresponding the differences between Stanley and Joey), and we are introduced to both of them engaged in 'masculine' work, Tracy reporting for television, Connie trying to repair a washing machine. Obviously, Joey and Tracy (physically, the film's most unmistakably attractive characters) embody the 'exotic,' while Stanley and Connie embody the 'normal'—but a normality that has lost all its rationale and is rapidly disintegrating. Neither is the 'exotic' embodied by Tracy exactly simple: she has dropped all connection with her ethnic background in her drive for achievement within the white world. The film in fact constructs a triple grid—white/Chinese, normal/exotic, rich/poor—and no character occupies a clearcut or unproblematic position on it. From Stanley White's viewpoint, for example, Tracy's exoticness is as much a matter of her remarkable luxury penthouse as of her ethnic difference. Both women suffer violence (murder, rape) because of the actions of the two men, the violence being ordered by Joey but provoked by Stanley.

b. *Structural markers.* What I have in mind here is Cimino's ability (it is of course not exclusive to him, being one of the founding principles of classical narrative, but he uses it in particularly striking ways) to create moments that suddenly

bring together elements of the film that have hitherto appeared discrete and unconnected. Probably the most impressive is the climactic moment of *The Deer Hunter* (Nick's suicide) with its abrupt fusion of the film's major structural opposition, the 'one shot' of the deer hunt and the Russian roulette game. In *Heaven's Gate* the burning of Nate's cabin brings together two emblems associated with Ella and her relationships with Nate and Averill: Nate's 'wall-paper' of newsheets, proudly displayed to Ella as his way of 'civilising the wilderness,' and the carriage Averill gave her for her birthday, now used as a fire-carrier. Or, in the same film, more remarkably because it connects events separated by three hours of screen time, the Reverend Doctor's exhortation to the graduates of 1870 to bring education to the nation realized in Averill's training of a revolutionary populace in the use of Roman siege-weapons. The example I give from *Year of the Dragon* was suggested to me by Richard Lippe. Near the beginning of the film, in the Chinese restaurant, Stanley and Tracy discuss the exploitation of the Chinese by American capitalism, the use of virtual slave labor in the building of the railroads; at the climax, Joey Tai is finally defeated by the train that prevents his escape and destroys his car. In all these cases, what is important is the complex emotional resonance rather than any neatly explicable 'meaning': Joey, himself Chinese, has been exploiting the Chinese as ruthlessly as any American capitalist. The comparison is actually made within the film by Stanley White (somewhat confusingly, given White's dedication to 'America'): he remarks, of Joey's progress up the Chinese mafia hierarchy, 'Marry the boss's daughter, kill the boss, become the boss: it's the American Dream.'

Tracy (Ariane) at work.



c. *Set design/film design.* Even those critics (the great majority) who are generally hostile to Cimino's work credit his films (though not Cimino) with one virtue, impressive set design and art direction: Cimino, one gathers, is a thoroughly incompetent upstart film-maker who has had the great good fortune to have excellent art directors coincidentally working for him. What such an account neglects to recognize is that the sets and art direction are always integral to the architecture of the films. The great 'set-pieces' of *Heaven's Gate*—the waltz around the tree/mock battle around the tree, the circular roller-skating, the real battle around a group of trees—are not just spectacularly beautiful or striking individual *tours-de-force*, they are inextricable components in the film's 'grand design.' *Year of the Dragon* defines the various strata of the society it depicts in terms of relative height and depth, its extremes marked by the two most striking sets in the film: on the one hand Tracy's open-plan penthouse apartment, on the other the terrible cellar in which the oppressed Chinese laborers struggle among soybean products. Hence the logic of the climactic moment when Tracy's apartment is invaded, and her person violated, by Chinatown's 'gutter' hoodlums. Joey Tai's greatest moment of victory is set on a mountaintop, and his moment of greatest ignominy comes when he is beaten up in a washroom.

3. The failure of *Year of the Dragon*. The most obvious manifestation of the problem of *Year of the Dragon* is the casting of Mickey Rourke in a role that seems tailor-made for Clint Eastwood (when I first read that Rourke had been cast in the movie I decided that he must be going to play the protagonist's young Chinese assistant!—at least it seemed less implausible than the idea that he would play the novel's Arthur Powers). In the past, Cimino's seemingly eccentric casting decisions have paid off magnificently: witness Isabelle Huppert and John Hurt in *Heaven's Gate* (and I would add, against the derision of many reviewers, Ariane here—she has a wonderful presence that Cimino uses very effectively). Such is not the case in the casting of Rourke. One small symptom of Cimino's failure to achieve a clear focus is his apparent uncertainty about the character's age, evidenced in the curiously shifting make-up (the color of his hair is particularly unstable). The symptom indicates an altogether deeper level of failure, the failure to define a coherent attitude to the protagonist, who is the film's centre.

The problem is not just Cimino's, though the specificities of his work expose it perhaps more sharply than it has been exposed elsewhere. The problem runs through the whole of American popular cinema and American culture: the problem of the individualist hero, within a society that cannot countenance any form of progressive activity that is not individual (compare the rumblings about 'Marxist content' that greeted *Heaven's Gate*, with its celebration of communal activism). The problem was raised in the famous article on *Young Mr. Lincoln* by the *Cahiers du Cinéma* editorial collective (1970): the film's conscious ideological project is to celebrate a great national hero, while its unconscious work produces Lincoln as a 'monstrous figure,' at once 'castrating and castrated,' increasingly cut off from human intercourse. The figure of the hero becomes explicitly problematic through the '50s, for example in the westerns of Anthony Mann, which are haunted by the possibility that the individualist hero may be a dangerous psychopath. The key text is clearly *The Searchers*, another artistic failure of considerable distinction: Ford's film, like Cimino's, virtually disintegrates before one's eyes under the stress produced by its internal contradictions. It is notorious that it has provided the inspiration for a whole series of American films through the '70s and '80s, of which *Taxi Driver* and *The Deer Hunter* are patently the most distin-

guished. Scorsese's film represents a valiant attempt, if not to resolve the contradictions (which is impossible, within the American capitalist system), at least to organize them in a coherent system of oppositions, relating Travis Bickle both to the western hero and the horror film monster; it moves towards an 'ironic' ending in which the precise nature and aim of the irony is unreadable, marked by a kind of paralysis.

What is striking about *Year of the Dragon* is its refusal even to attempt to resolve, reconcile or significantly organize its contradictions: it lurches between denunciations of the hero and celebrations of him. The failure of the central performance (it is not Rourke's fault) has consequences that further complicate response to the film. One is that the villain, Joey, given John Lone's physical beauty and charismatic presence, becomes a far more attractive figure than Stanley White—quite insidiously, as he is morally vicious, a ruthless and murderous exploiter. Another is that the sympathetic characters who oppose and denounce Stanley and are in effect his victims—Connie, Tracy, the Chinese assistant—gain additional force (the women's voices are allowed greater strength and autonomy than in any previous Cimino film).

What has happened here? One would like to argue that Cimino, after the formal/narrative audacities of *Heaven's Gate*, has been forced back into the strictures and closure of classical narrative, and has responded by producing a work whose incoherence embodies a protest (whether conscious or 'intuitive') against that imposition. I don't think so. It is illuminating to compare *Year of the Dragon* with *To Live and Die in LA*. Friedkin's brilliant film has nothing of the problems of Cimino's because—drawing on the reserves of cynicism and nihilism that have been a determining feature of his work—he is able to define a perfectly coherent and rigorous attitude to the individualist hero, and to the civilization of which he is the representative, one of total negativity. Cimino—for better and worse—would be absolutely incapable of making such a film. Basic to all his work so far has been the drive towards affirmation, and he has the misfortune to be developing within a society where there is nothing left to affirm. Or, more precisely, all that could be validly affirmed would be constructive opposition, the development of a radical alternative ideology, an undertaking to which, as we know, Hollywood is and must be immovably inimical. Cimino appears to grasp—intermittently—that Stanley White is an impossible and intolerable figure, but the system neither provides nor allows an alternative to him. Hence, I suppose, the ending of *Year of the Dragon*, one of the worst in any Hollywood movie I can think of: White struggling heroically on, and to the strains of Mahler's 'Resurrection' Symphony, no less, and actually being joined and supported by Tracy, who previously (and rightly) dismissed him from her life. The ending (in whose tone I can detect no irony, much as I would wish to) does not resolve the film's contradictions so much as attempt, grotesquely, to trample them underfoot.

Cimino's work so far exists on that shadowy borderline where confusion and ambivalence *almost* become organized into genuine complexity—the point where contradictory attitudes can be held in balance with each other in a fruitful tension, not just voiced indiscriminately and incoherently in the hope that someone, somewhere, will be able to make sense of them. I continue to find him one of the few really fascinating and distinguished figures working in Hollywood today, and I think *Year of the Dragon*—clearly the least satisfying of his four films as director—continues to provide abundant evidence in support of that assertion. The failure that marks all his work to date is—to put it brutally but I think justly—quite simply the abeyance of rigorous thinking. □

FINAL CUT

Dreams and Disaster in the Making of HEAVEN'S GATE

by Steven Bach

by Robin Wood

Final Cut: Dreams and Disaster in the Making of Heaven's Gate

by Steven Bach
Morrow, 1985

First, let it be said that, whatever your attitude to *Heaven's Gate*, and whether or not you have seen it, Steven Bach's book is essential reading for anyone interested in the contemporary Hollywood cinema and its conditions of production. From this viewpoint, it offers a fascinating extended gloss on points made forcefully and succinctly by Arthur Penn in the interview in *CineAction! 5*: a unifying thread of the book is the takeover of Hollywood by conglomerates and businessmen who see movies solely as commodities and assess each project strictly in terms of its market value—which can be assessed only by reference to the project's degree of resemblance to previously lucrative commodities. Bach looks back nostalgically to the time when United Artists was formed by a group of united artists—Griffith, Chaplin, Fairbanks, Pickford. What is most touching about the book is its sense of someone

trying to preserve a tradition of 'quality' and, above all, decency in an age that has rendered such ambitions obsolete. Bach's supreme consciously held value would appear to be fairness: the book attempts to be fair to everyone, even to Cimino, meticulously documenting and verifying everything that can be documented and verified, trying to understand points of view. While no one is exempted from criticism, Bach builds portraits (the 'rounded characterizations' of the popular novelist) of many of his colleagues that convey generosity, affection and respect.

The attempt at fairness is, in Cimino's case, only partially successful. It is not only that Bach's animus against Cimino continually threatens to, and occasionally does, erupt: the problem is more fundamental. Like Count Dracula in Bram Stoker's novel, Cimino cannot be permitted to express a point of view or the entire moral structure of the book would collapse. Also like Dracula, he is absent from its surface for most of its length, a terrible, unpredictable, ultimately incomprehensible hidden force. Unless Bach is lying (and nothing suggests to me that he is), it is clear that Cimino (again like Dracula) behaved very badly in a number of ways during the making of the film, and there can be no doubt that he exasperated and antagonized a lot of not unreasonable people. Yet the sense that the book cannot really understand him remains inescapable, and one suspects, beyond that, that it cannot afford to understand him: its own point of view would be too seriously threatened.

Because he appears to be utterly unaware of them, Bach exposes his own deficiencies and limitations with perfect candor. The image he presents of himself and the precise nature of his commitment to the cinema is two-fold: he is, as any successful Hollywood executive of course must be, a shrewd and intelligent businessman; he is also interested in film as 'art.' He is clearly dedicated to reconciling these concerns—or, to put it another way, to suppressing any sense that there might be a serious conflict between them. The businessman side can be unproblematically proud that United Artists produced the James Bond movies; the problem arises with Bach's notion of what constitutes a 'great' film. To be 'great,' it seems, a film must be both 'artistic' (i.e. displaying a certain set of signifiers that the bourgeois audience can identify as such) and commercially successful; Bach's notions of the artistic never transcend the most conventional canons of bourgeois 'taste.' The directors he most admires (with perfect logic)—they are held up as exemplary model figures, in implicit contrast to Cimino—are David Lean and Woody Allen: they not only make art and money simultaneously, they also behave well, they are 'gentlemen.' Allen can, I suppose, be defended as a distinctive minor talent; Lean never transcends an earnest, ponderous and assiduously 'tasteful' academicism. Personally, if I had to choose between *Heaven's Gate* and their combined *oeuvres* I would choose *Heaven's Gate*.

One of Bach's strongest and most often reiterated complaints about Cimino is that he refused to communicate with anyone (including, of course, Bach himself); it is possible, however, that he felt that there was no one with whom he *could* seriously communicate. One wonders whether he was pleased by Bach's initial enthusiastic response on viewing the first set of 'dailies': 'It looks like



Heaven's Gate: the 'Blue Danube' at Harvard (above) and the reconstruction of Casper, Wyoming.



David Lean decided to make a western.' That it was impossible for Bach and his associates to get through to him (at least until the stage of deterioration where communication could only take the form of threats and counter-threats) does not necessarily prove that he couldn't have been reached. Indeed, Bach's very virtues—reasonableness, common sense, business acumen—combined with their corollary, a very limited aesthetic imagination, may well have hindered the communication they were devoted to trying to serve. It is not a question, of course, simply of irresponsibly indulging Cimino's excesses, but of understanding the drives that gave rise to them. There is no doubt that Cimino became increasingly isolated and that his own actions and attitudes consistently intensified the isolation; one would like to learn—and Bach can offer few hints—why Cimino felt driven to behave as he did. Perhaps one day we shall be given his own account of the making of *Heaven's Gate*.

'Megalomania' seems too simple—and too simply hostile—an explanation. The line that separates megalomania from artistic obsession can be narrow to the point of invisibility. Bach himself testifies (giving them perhaps less emphasis than they deserve) to a number of positive factors that complicate the popular image of Cimino-as-monster. The actual work of filming was thoroughly professional, controlled, disciplined; Cimino secured the unreserved dedication of his actors (I think this is sufficiently evident from their performances on screen, but it is good to have the impression corroborated); he gave himself to the project totally and tirelessly, often working 18 hours a day. Bach writes, generously: "One thing is certain: I believe there to have been not one day or one moment in the turbulent history of *Heaven's Gate* in which Michael Cimino intended anything other than to create 'a masterpiece', a work of lasting art. His certainty that he was doing so conditioned that history and much of the behaviour of those around him. He did not set out to destroy or damage a company but believed he would enrich it, economically and aesthetically."

In the contemporary arts in general, but in the modern American cinema especially, the Cimino of *Heaven's Gate* is an archaic figure, the archetype of the Romantic artist, the person with a vision so intense and compelling that its realization overrides all considerations of reasonableness and economics; a vision that became increasingly vast as shooting progressed, accounting for the fact that the two versions of the film still have something of an unfinished quality, the air of a 'work in progress' that is one of the film's most fascinating (though not exactly 'commercial') characteristics. There are many reasons, both aesthetic and political, why *Heaven's Gate* could not have been a commercial success in the context of Reaganite America and the cinema it deserves. Whether it need have been so complete a financial disaster is another matter. (One also wants to ask why that disaster has been publicized and flaunted to the point where it has become almost proverbial, while the closely comparable disaster of John Huston's *Annie* was allowed to slip by almost unmentioned.) Had there been people in charge who were capable of sharing Cimino's vision and committing themselves to it, the initial (anti-)critical response might have been braved and *something* salvaged: certainly not forty million dollars, but presumably a few million would have been better than nothing. No box office failure has ever been transformed

into a success by being cut. Personally, I have always felt that the so-called 'complete' *Heaven's Gate* was not too long but too short. One of Bach's most tantalizing revelations is that he and a few other privileged (and ungrateful) people saw Cimino's original cut—all five hours and 25 minutes of it. One would like to know what happened to all the footage, and whether there is any hope that the film might one day be restored, as has happened with *A Star is Born* and *New York, New York*. I am aware that in the present critical climate the suggestion will provoke raised eyebrows if not derisive laughter, but let us wait a few years and then see. What is particularly sad is that, after the disastrous premiere, Cimino's own confidence collapsed and he himself (according to Bach) proposed that the film be withdrawn and cut further: he too was defeated by the response of the fashionable 'Invitation Only' audience and a handful of powerfully influential journalist-reviewers. I think time will prove that Cimino *did* indeed create 'a work of lasting art.' There are signs already that rehabilitation is unobtrusively preparing itself, and not only in Europe. The reviews of my recent book *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* have been predominantly hostile, but not one so far has challenged my detailed championship of *Heaven's Gate* and one—the most unfavorable of all—singled it out as one of the book's only redeeming features. There is also the phenomenon of the great popularity of *Final Cut* itself, which has already gone into paperback: Bach's book is being read by thousands of people who presumably have not had a chance to see the film and, while it is true that everyone loves a good scandal, this seems also to testify to a very widespread curiosity. It is to Bach's credit that his book will whet that curiosity rather than negate it. □

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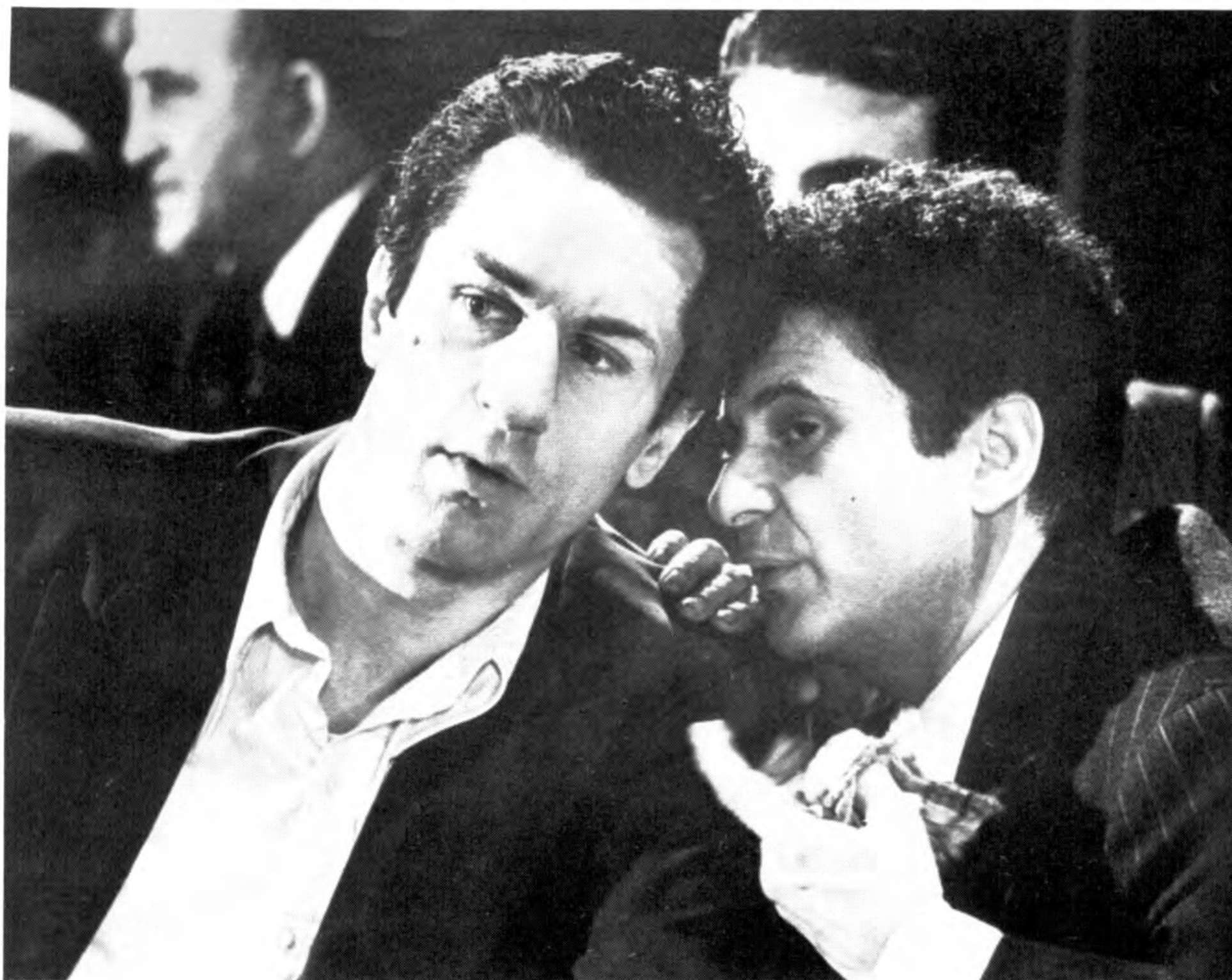
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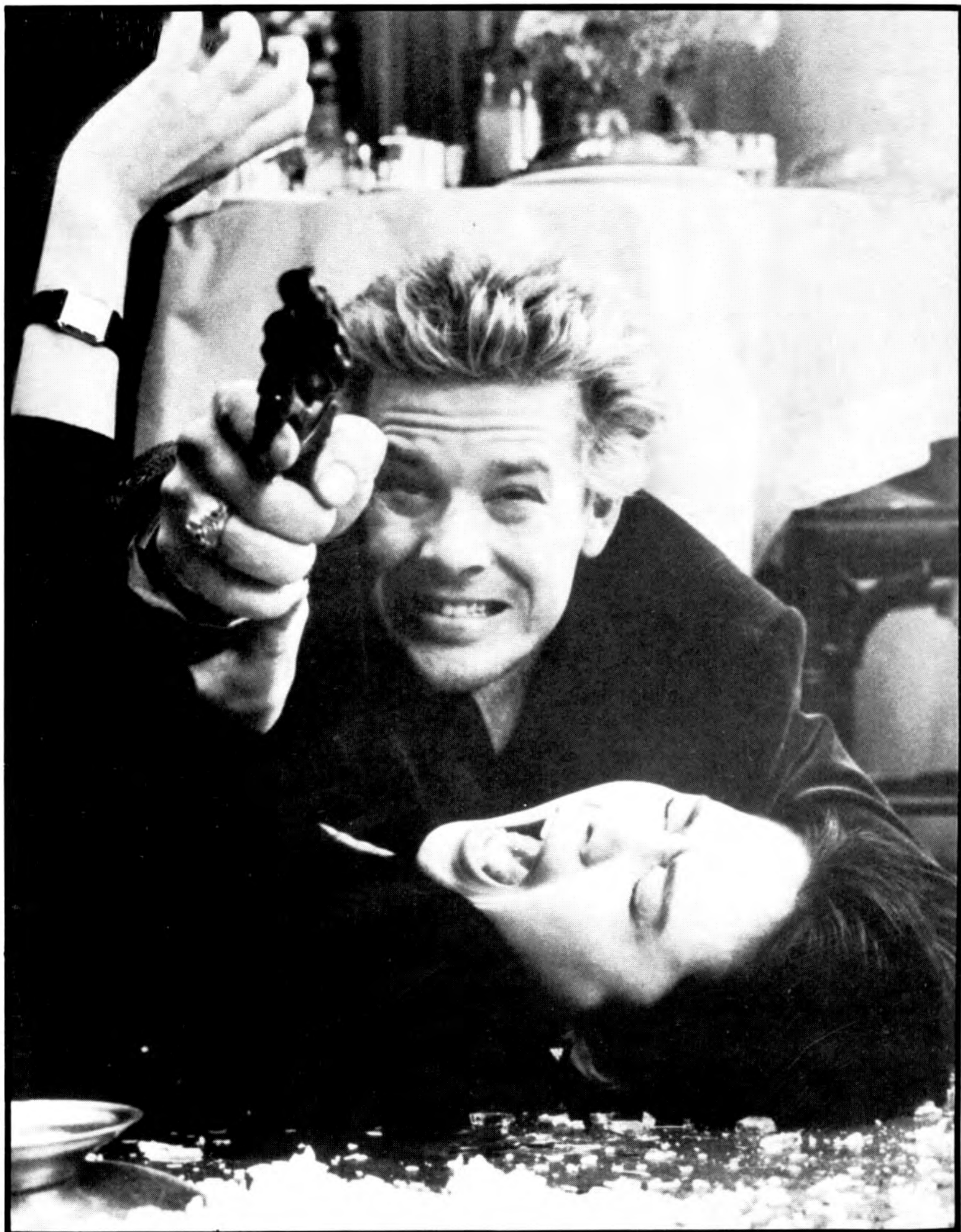
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Above: Raging Bull



Y E A R O F T H E D R A G O N